

MIKE SHAYNE

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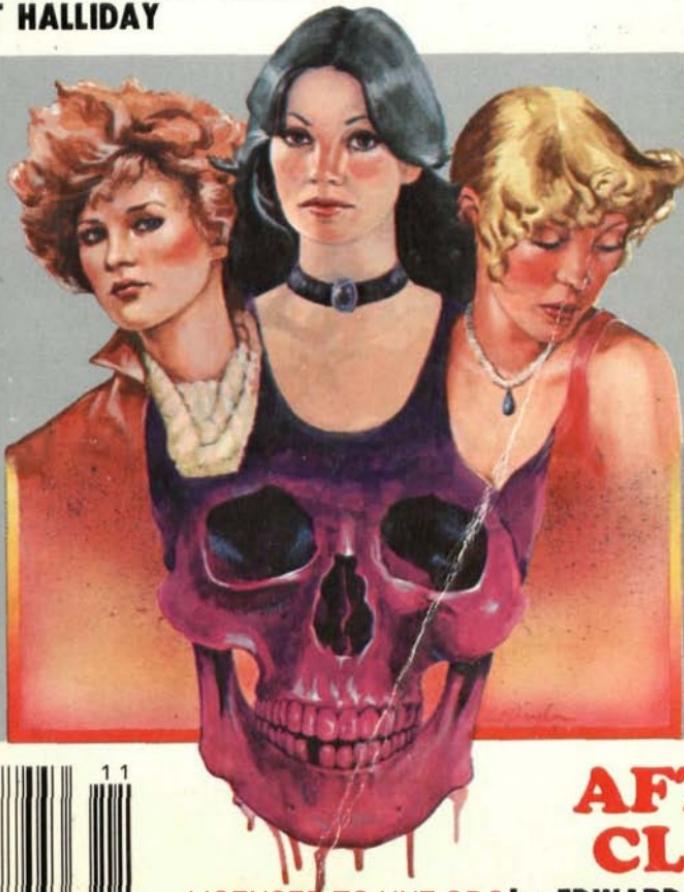


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BURY YOU LATER

The New MIKE SHAYNE Short Novel

by BRETT HALLIDAY



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MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NOV., 1978
VOL. 42, NO. 11

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

BURY YOU LATER

by BRETT HALLIDAY

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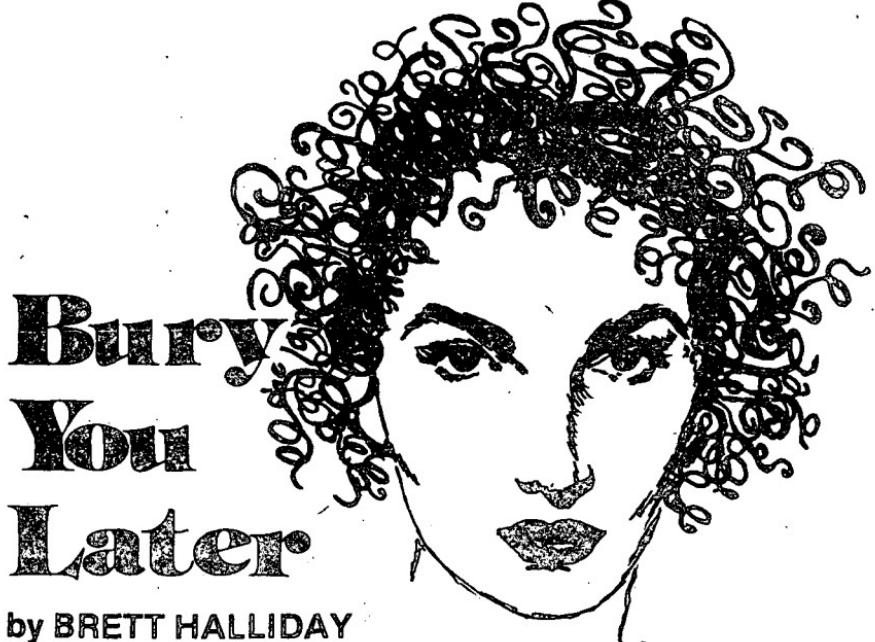
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Bury You Later

by BRETT HALLIDAY

To Shayne, voodoo was something he could take or leave alone—until he finds himself close to death from Obeah magic.

THE NIGHTMARE, if it was a nightmare, lay beyond the realm of Mike Shayne's experience. The beautifully modeled face, with its narrow, long-lashed light green eyes, with its wide full sensual lips half parted in irresistible allure, drew him from his bed as if he were an iron filing drawn by a powerful magnet. Rippling bronze hair grew long and longer, wrapping itself around him like heavy seaweed.

Then, as he moved toward it, the lovely, evil face receded—and he followed. The long hair turned to tendrils, coiling about his

ankles, his wrists, his body, like the deadly tresses of a re-born Medusa. As he struggled to reach that face, it underwent a slow change.

The green eyes went deeper, lost their color, became empty sockets. The firm sweet flesh around them faded, revealing the bones beneath. The lips slowly disappeared to show the hideous white teeth behind them. But, as fleshly allure faded, the long bronze tresses grew, enveloping him ever more tightly, pulling him irresistably toward an embrace with a human skull.

Shayne's reaction was not fear but anger—furious anger. He wanted only to smash that skull, to tear it from whatever body supported it, to hurl it at the nearest wall, to trample it underfoot. But his arms were not free to strike, nor were his legs free for independent action.

He felt himself falling, even as he reached for the neck with despair and fury. The hard jolt of carpeted floor knocked the wind from his six-foot one-inch frame. Skull and snakelike tendrils vanished.

He was lying flat on his face, on the carpet of his bedroom, stark naked, less than a foot from the open window. He shuddered, not from outer cold, for the Miami night was balmy, but from a deep inner chill.

Somewhere in the distance, he heard the click of a spring lock in a closing door...

He rolled to a sitting position, hugged his knees, driving the dregs of nightmare from the fugitive crannies of his consciousness. He was shuddering with reaction, his powerful body weak as a kitten's, bathed in a chill sweat.

Jesus! he thought. What in hell was that?

Over the decades of his existence, Mike Shayne had suffered occasional nightmares—but never anything like this. His head held the remoteness of high fever, his stomach fluttered as if he were about to throw up. Scramb-

ling unsteadily to his feet, he barely made the bathroom in time...

When he emerged, clad in the biscuit flannel robe Lucy Hamilton had given him for his last birthday, the detective felt drained but rid of the horror that had so hideously disrupted his slumber. He went to the kitchenette of his apartment, turned on the flame under the Silex. Waiting for it to bubble, he sat at the small white-plastic-topped table, reached for the grocery memo pad and, slowly and painfully began to note down the nightmare.

He lighted a cigaret, but it tasted like ashes in his mouth. He put it out in the square glass tray on the table, licked the tip of the pencil before he began to write. He well knew how rapidly the most vivid dreams fragment and fade if they are not set down immediately upon walking...

When he had finished, the coffee was perking and he poured himself a cup. At the halfway point, he paused, put the Silex down, picked up the near-full bottle of Martell on the drainboard at his elbow, hesitated, then poured in the brandy almost to the brim.

What the hell! he thought. I might as well be half seas over as feeling like this. Besides, coffee's too hot and I need it—now.

Even so, the first two mouth-

fuls he gulped down scorched his throat and esophagus, landed with agonizing warmth in his stomach. For four long suffering seconds, he thought he was going to throw up again. Then strength flowed outward from his stomach, and he was able to fill his lungs with air and exhale slowly.

Three more deep breaths, another two swallows, and he was able to relight his cigaret and peruse the scratchy notes he had put on the pad.

It was there, it had happened, and enough was recorded so that he could easily recall the rest. But a couple of things jogged his memory, things not included in the notes that caused him to frown and tug his left earlobe.

His fall in the bedroom. Somewhere in the back of his consciousness lurked a distinct impression of having been pushed from behind. Slowly, still weakened by the experience, Shayne rose and retraced his steps to the bedroom.

He had regained consciousness right beneath the opened window that led to the fire escape beyond. If he had been drawn through it by the Medusa-like face and snakelike hair, he might have fallen, probably to his death. Leaning outward, he looked for clues of occupancy, could find none in the moonlit night.

Then there was a fugitive later sound of the doorlock springing. He made his way slowly to the

living room, across it and through the small vestibule of the aging apartment hotel to the corridor door. The chain hung loosely on its bracket.

Someone *had* been there, someone who had slipped out once his fall had shattered the grip of the nightmare. He put the chain back in its place and called Smitty, the night clerk downstairs.

A sleepy voice numbed, "Yes, Mr. Shayne?"

"Sorry," said the detective. "Has anyone been in or out in the last hour?"

"Nossir." The reply was muffled by an obvious yawn. "Anything wrong?"

"Forget it, Smitty." The redhead hung up, rubbed the night stubble of his lower face. Somebody, anybody, could have passed and repassed the desk without being seen. Someone equipped to deal with both a spring and a chain lock could easily have negotiated the front door of the hotel—or that which led from the basement garage, thus bypassing the small lobby entirely.

He went back toward the kitchen, then veered to the bathroom taking the toothbrush glass from the wall bracket and rinsing it thoroughly before he relieved himself further.

Over another brandy-laced cup of black coffee, a moderately restored Mike Shayne reviewed the events of the past thirty-six hours...

It had begun shortly after two o'clock on Friday afternoon. Lucy had been seated on a corner of the detective's office desk, using all her blandishments to persuade the redhead to come with her on a weekend visit to her Aunt Polly in Tampa. Shayne, who had a weekend of deep-sea fishing off the Keys in mind, had been reluctant.

"We'll have plenty of time to be alone," she pressed. "You know Aunt Polly spends most of her time in the garden or cooking up a storm."

"Unless memory fails me, Angel" — he withdrew his large hand gently from her smaller one — "your Aunt Polly has a habit of popping in unannounced at the most embarrassing moments. Why not come fishing with me?"

Lucy wrinkled her pert little nose. "I remember the last time." She achieved a visible shudder. It was three days before I could get the smell of fish scales from my hands. And the sun blistered my nose."

"Put that white stuff on it," Shayne suggested.

"And look like a clown? No thanks. Come to Tampa with me. You can fish in the Gulf if you must destroy marine life."

"I prefer the Keys — and the Atlantic." His jaw set stubbornly. So did hers.

The silent impasse held until the telephone sounded its summons.

Lucy picked it up, said, "Yes, he's here. Who shall I say is calling?" Moments later, covering the mouthpiece, she offered it to the detective, said at his lifted left eyebrow, "A Mr. Martinssen. He wants to talk to you."

Shayne took the instrument, said, "Mike Shayne, Mr. Martinssen."

"Phil Davison suggested you. Not that I don't know you by reputation, Mr. Shayne. I have a problem. My wife's life seems to be in danger."

So it had begun. The detective had checked Martinssen out with Davison, who said, "Lou Martinssen is A-One. A planter-importer-exporter based here and in El Salvador. I'll vouch for him all the way."

"That's all I need to know, Phil," Shayne had replied. "Do you know his wife?"

"Medora? She's a lovely lady. Why?"

"Can't tell you, Phil — except that Martinssen mentioned her in his call."

"Medora? I can't believe it."

"It's not what you think," the redhead assured him. "He's concerned about her safety."

"But who'd want to hurt Medora Martinssen?" Davison mused.

"That," said Shayne, "seems to be the crux of the matter. Keep it under your hat."

So Mike Shayne and Lucy went their separate ways that weekend. Martinssen's office matched the

man. It was large, handsome, quietly opulent in appearance. In height, its owner topped the redhead by about an inch. If his brown hair was thinning at the temples, baldness lay years in his future. He was slim, with a dark suntan in contrast to his light blue eyes, wore a pale blue turtle-neck above a pair of beautifully tailored tan vicuna slacks. He looked more appropriate to a yacht-club sun-deck than to an obviously active business office.

Waving the detective to a chair, Martinssen opened a drawer of his halfacre sandalwood desk, drew from it a small plastic bag, upended it and shook out what might have been a badminton bird, said, "What do you make of it?"

His voice was soft, Carolinian, well bred.

Shayne leaned forward, frowned a moment, poked at it gently with a forefinger. Then, lifting his grey eyes, "I've seen items like this. Obeah?"

Martinssen said, "I was afraid you'd say that."

"Where did you find it?"

"Inside my wife's bedroom door," Martinssen replied. "It's the third time in the past nine days."

"What's in the sack?" The redhead indicated the tiny pouch to which the cock-feathers were attached with a string.

"Damn if I know. But it stinks like the devil," was the reply.

"Any reason why your wife

should be a target?" the detective asked.

Martinssen spread his well-groomed, sunbronzed hands. "None that I know of," he said.

"I don't know a hell of a lot about voodoo," Shayne told him. "But this looks like early magic — not necessarily dangerous."

"But how did they get there?" Martinssen countered. "Our house has full security — a link-fence, alarms, guard dogs. So how . . . ?" He left it hanging.

"What happened to the first two?" the redhead asked.

"I threw them in the trash." He leaned against his desk, blocking out part of the view of the bay and Miami Beach's hotel ramparts through the broad plate glass window behind his desk. "Maybe this seems trivial to you, but it's not to me. I want you to investigate. I've lived long enough in Central America not to underrate this sort of thing."

Shayne said, "How long have you and your wife had separate rooms, Martinssen?"

Martinssen colored beneath his tan, said, "You are blunt, Shayne." Then, shaking his handsome head, "Phil Davison warned me."

"I believe in cutting through to the heart of things as quickly as possible," the redhead assured him.

"Well, it's not the way it sounds," the planter-importer replied. "Medora and I have a lovely

relationship. But she can't sleep unless she's alone. It seems I snore."

The detective nodded, said, "Anything else?"

"This." Martinssen groped again in the desk drawer, came up with another small plastic bag. This time, he didn't shake out its contents but removed them carefully, held out to the redhead a small waxen image of a naked woman. A single golden hair was implanted in its otherwise bald scalp and the eye-end of a steel needle protruded from its chest.

"I found this on Medora's coverlet when I went in to wake her this morning."

Shayne accepted the doll, studied it closely, his thin lips pursed. Then, looking up, "Does she know about this?"

Martinssen shook his head. "I don't want her frightened. She's a — Medora is a very special girl. . . gentle, easily hurt."

Shayne nodded, handed the doll back, said, "I take it your wife has golden hair."

Martinssen nodded, replied, "This could be from her own head."

"It probably is." The detective's voice was dry as he stood up and returned the doll. "I take it you know what this means — in obeah?"

"That's why I consulted Phil," the planter replied. "That's why you're here. Shayne, I want you to find out who's doing this to her."

The redhead hesitated. Then, "Martinssen, voodoo is hardly my pigeon. But threat of murder — and this definitely looks like one." He thought of Lucy's Aunt Polly and her infernal interruptions, said, "So I'll be glad to do what I can."

That was how it had begun. And now, thirty-six hours later, Mike Shayne himself was a potential victim of obeah — voodoo — black magic . . .

II

WHEN SHAYNE LEFT Lou Martinssen's office, he took with him the two voodoo objects. In his car, via the radio telephone, he called Police Headquarters, drove there directly. Captain Eli Tanner, chief of the Department of Frauds and Bunco, was waiting for him.

"You don't get to see us often, Mike," he said, rising to greet the redhead detective. "How's the fishing?" Tanner was a large, shirtsleeved man whose fondness for hooking marlin and other forms of marine life was evidenced by his scarlet complexion and short blistered nose.

Shayne grimaced, said, "I was planning to go out this weekend."

"But. . . ?" The captain's slanted smile was sympathetic.

"But — *these*." The redhead placed the plastic bags Martinssen had given him on Tanner's desk.

Tanner opened them, studied their contents with narrowed bright brown eyes. Frowning, he

looked up at the detective, said, "This isn't exactly your line is it, Mike? These look like obeah. Who's the victim?"

"Nobody — yet," Shayne replied. "Somebody's been laying them on the wife of my client. Are they authentic?"

"They look authentic to me." Tanner opened the sack to which the feathers were attached, sniffed, made a wry face, hastily retied it, added, "This one *smells* like the real thing." He grimaced again, reached for the phone. "Let me get Olmeda — voodoo is his specialty."

Lieutenant Olmeda, a dark, wiry little man, studied the objects closely for long, silent seconds. Then, turning to the redhead, "I'd say your client's wife could be in a lot of trouble, Mr. Shayne."

"You mean you believe in this mumbo jumbo?" the redhead asked.

"No." Olmedo shook his head. "But what I believe doesn't matter. It's what the intended victim believes that counts."

"I'm not sure I follow you," Shayne replied.

"It's all a matter of suggestion," Olmeda explained. He nodded toward the lamp on Captain Tanner's desk. "The captain turns it on and we have light. No problem for you or me. We know about electricity. But to a savage, it's magic."

"Get to it, Juan," said his superior.

"Well, the same thing works in reverse. To a civilized man, certain savage skills are inexplicable — ability to detect game by scent or how to read local weather predictions without instruments. We have lost those skills, so we no longer believe in them."

"I'm with you, Lieutenant." Mike Shayne nodded. "We no longer believe in them."

"Exactly." Olmeda agreed. "To us" — he nodded toward the feathers and the tiny doll pierced by a needle — "these objects are ridiculous if rather gruesome toys. But to someone brought up in the belief that they mean death. . ." He let it hang.

"In other words," said the redhead, "if they do not suggest danger or death to you, they can't hurt you." And, at the lieutenant's nod, "But what about the cases I've heard of where items like this brought sickness or death to non-believers?"

"In those cases, Mr. Shayne, "either the victim *did* believe beneath an outer layer of disbelief, or" — he paused, then added — "some outside means were used to make the threat look effective."

"Poison?" the detective suggested.

Olmeda shrugged. "Poison — or a real needle through the heart — or some other concrete technique for making good the threat. Obeah people fear the person who

does not believe, just as the devout man fears the atheist — because as Thoreau said, 'he marches to a different drummer'."

"And that," said Captain Tanner, "is where we come in. We can't control peoples' beliefs, but we can try to protect them against physical attack, or at least bring the human agents to justice."

Both officers looked at Shayne pointedly, and he knew they were hoping he would reveal the name of his client. He sighed, shook his red head, said, "Not yet, Lou. I'm just getting onto this case — and the potential victim is guarded by every modern security device in the book. But, just for openers, is there much of this sort of thing going on in Miami?"

The two officers exchanged pointed glances. Then Tanner said to the redhead. "There's plenty of it around. Remember, since Castro came in, hundreds of thousands of Cubans have emigrated here."

"But I thought obeah came from Haiti," Shayne suggested.

"Originally, it did," Olmeda told him. "But with the Cubans have come Haitians, Dominicans, Central Americans. Remember, they brought voodoo to New Orleans two centuries ago. Right now, there are two major cults vying for power here in Miami — one based on Haiti, the other on Central America — El Salvador, to pinpoint it."

The redhead's left eyebrow

rose. He said, "Is there anyone I can talk to who could fill me in?"

When Mike Shayne left Police Headquarters approximately an hour later, the last golden shafts of the setting sun were slanting through the crevices of the city's palisades. His head felt like a filing cabinet folder into which some careless secretary had stuffed an overload of documentary material . . .

The Haitian element — established at least a dozen years before, apparently in beneficent control of susceptible elements in the West Indian population, as untouchable legally as the black movement in the northeastern states founded long ago by Harlem's Father Divine, headed ostensibly by a powerful woman named Brenda, nee Marie Lascelles from Port au Prince.

The Salvadorian element — more recent, more active, much smaller in number of followers but far more aggressive and subject to greater police surveillance, its legality in many respects suspect, its chief priestess named Andrea Gorges.

Incidents — spells, curses, suspicious deaths whose criminality had thus far evaded the best efforts of the law, overt violence still in abeyance but expected to erupt at any moment.

Shayne had remarked on the fact that both factions were led by women, to be informed by Lieu-

tenant Olmeda that the ancestry of voodoo ran back far beyond history in its African roots to a time when women ruled, as they had in prehistoric Europe and Asia.

"You see, Mr. Shayne," the lieutenant informed him, "until the male discovered that he had a role, however minor, in the creation of children, women were treated as creatures of magic ability to produce offspring. In some portions of the uncivilized world, this worship still exists . . ."

When he had finished and Olmeda departed, Shayne had said to Captain Tanner, "My God, Eli, he sounds more like a professor than a cop."

"Juan lectures at the university," Tanner informed him. "He's a real nut on the subject of religious anthropology," adding, "But he's a damn good cop, too."

His head spinning, the detective adjourned to The Beef House for dinner and a drink. Tim Rourke awaited him in their usual rear booth. The saturnine ace reporter of the Miami *Daily News* said, "I thought you were going fishing."

"I am." The redhead signalled Peggy, the redhead waitress for his usual. "I'm fishing for voodoo dolls."

"Come again?"

Shayne gave his friend a fill-in on what had happened. Tim listened, his long head cocked on one side, then said, "You

must have gone bananas — voodoo, yet! You do need a drink."

"According to the cops, it's a real problem," the detective replied. "They expect trouble any time."

"A witches' war?" Rourke's slightly bloodshot hazel eyes showed twin gleams of interest. "You got the doll with you?"

The detective shook his head. "I left the stuff with Eli Tanner. He and Olmeda want the police lab to look it over. I thought I'd better leave them a sop before they got after the identity of my client."

"Martinssen," the reporter mused as the girl brought the drinks and Shayne took a healthy pull at his triple Martell on the rocks. "Knight Martinssen . . . the name rings a bell somewhere. Not with voodoo, though — more likely like bananas and pineapples."

"I haven't had time to look him up. You might check him out for me, Tim."

"Will do," Rourke promised, picking up his own glass. "Better watch your step, Mike, before some obeah queen starts sending you chicken feathers — or a doll with a red hair in its scalp and a needle through its itty bitty heart."

"Oh, shut up!" Shayne told him. "Let's eat."

Against Tim's massive mound of roast beef hash beneath a blanket of four fried eggs and a quilt of ketchup, the redhead stood him-

self to a massive pair of mutton chops, each wrapped around a lamb's kidney, with golden German fried potatoes and thick asparagus spears drenched in butter. He had not eaten since mid-morning and felt half-starved but had to force himself to finish his food. For some unnameable reason, his stomach felt queasy.

Shayne decided to go home early. He could not account for his malaise. There was nothing he could put his finger on, nor did he feel sufficiently ill to call for medical aid. Excusing himself, he brushed off Tim's gibes about growing prematurely old and went out to his car in the parking lot, sitting in silence while he fought a desire to crawl into a hole somewhere and pull it in after him.

Knowing he could not give way to it there, he reached for the radio phone under his dashboard and called his client's Bal Harbour number. When Martinssen came on, his voice sounded strange. He said, "Jesus, I'm glad you called. Can you get out here? I want to see you."

"Something come up?" the redhead asked.

"Just my supper," said his client. "Plus everything else I ate today. I'm sorry, I shouldn't be bothering you with my personal problems, Shayne, but I'd like to talk to you. I don't understand what's happening to me."

"Have you called in a doctor?"

the detective asked.

"Yeah — Doc Millender. He's given me some kind of dope but it isn't doing much good. I'm worried for Medora."

"Why? Is she sick, too?"

"No — but in view of what's been happening . . ."

"I'll come out," Shayne replied, feeling grim. "Just where are you?"

Martinssen gave him directions and concluded, "Make it as quick as you can. I don't know how long I can hang on."

"I'll see you," the redhead promised. He hung up, gathering himself to make the effort. First Martinssen, now himself. But why should this malaise have struck them both? The answer eluded him.

Suddenly, Mike Shayne knew he was going to be sick. Nor was there time to return to the restaurant and use the men's room. He was barely able to scramble from the Buick and void his stomach in a corner of the parking lot.

Weak as a kitten, he got back behind the wheel, recalling what Lieutenant Olmeda had said about the power of suggestibility. He wondered if his client's account of being sick to his stomach had brought on his own attack. His decision was negative — he had already been feeling damned uncomfortable before he left The Beef House.

He wondered about the mutton chops — but Beef House food had

always been first class or Shayne would not have eaten there for so many years. Besides, the malaise had struck Knight Martinssen earlier, and it seemed unlikely that different foods, prepared and served miles apart, could have been the agency for both of them.

More than once, as he drove through the night-lighted city to its most expensive residential district, the redhead had to fight to keep his Buick in its proper traffic lane. Waves of dizziness all but overcame him at intervals, and twice he had to pull over and battle a desire to sleep behind the wheel.

The gilt-tipped spears crowning a pair of iron gates swung open in response to the honk of his horn, and the detective entered a curving driveway lined by rows of cypress trees, themselves spearlike against the star-sprinkled night sky.

The large turnaround area in front of the two-story white limestone mansion was crowded with cars. The space directly in front of the basalt steps that led to the double front doors was occupied by an ambulance, its top light whirling blood red. Galvanized by the obvious emergency activity, Shayne scrambled out of the Buick and approached the focus of excitement.

He was in time to see his client being wheeled carefully down the steps on a gurny, lying face up on the stretcher, his body wrapped in a strapped down sheet. Mar-

tinssen's face looked ghastly in the artificial light, but his eyes spotted the detective and he called feebly to the attendants to halt.

Shayne went over to him.

"Shayne . . ." Martinssen's voice sounded faint and distant in the detective's ears. "I don't know what's happened to me, but take care of Medora . . . please."

The eyes closed and his client spoke no more. The redhead watched the attendants place the stretcher in the ambulance, stood by till it rolled smoothly off.

A voice called, "Mr. Shayne!"

He turned. A tiny golden-haired woman in a white strapless evening gown was looking at him from the top of the steps. . .

III

SHE SAID AS the redhead joined her, "I'm Medora Martinssen. My husband just told me had hired you."

Shayne accepted the small soft hand proffered him, countered, "Did he tell you why?"

She hesitated, said, "Come inside, Mr. Shayne. This is hardly the place." She indicated the cars and people in the act of departing. And, turning to a large impassive brown-skinned man, "Juan, see them out."

"*Si, señora.*" He nodded, turned to obey. Moving swiftly, Medora Martinssen led the detective through a large, magnificently furnished living room to a smaller chamber beyond, whose

focus was on a small, gleamingly equipped black leather bar with chairs and a soft sofa to match.

Moving behind it, she said, "What is your wish, Mr. Shayne?"

His stomach still felt sore and uncertain. Repressing a belch, he said, "Nothing for me, Mrs. Martinssen."

She studied him, her eyes narrowed, then smiled faintly and busied herself with glasses, bottles and, ultimately, a blender. "This should help, Mr. Shayne."

He accepted the large foaming tumbler, eyed it suspiciously while she mixed herself what looked like a champagne cocktail, then tasted it warily. It held rich milk, a trace of nutmeg, a suggestion of brandy, softly rendered, that warmed his unhappy stomach instead of making him retch.

"Thanks," he said, putting it half-empty on the bar top. "What about your husband. He seemed all right when I talked to him this afternoon."

Medora looked distressed, revealing the sadness underlying the smooth warm beauty of her face, said, "I'm frightened, Mr. Shayne. Nothing like it has happened to him before. I've always thought of him as *el toro* — a bull." Her forehead wrinkled with worry. "But he'll be all right. He has to be all right. If I lost him . . ." She let it trail away.

"You're part Spanish?" he asked.

She shook her lovely head. "Not really, Mr. Shayne. My family emigrated to El Salvador after the Civil War. Everything they held here was ruined, of course. But they prospered there as planters — at least until after World War Two. Then my grandfather made some mistakes." She sighed, then smiled, brightening the dimly lighted room.

"But Knight came down and took charge. He made some wonderful deals with the frozen fruit people here in Florida. He got everything going again. And of course, he married me."

"I see." It was all he could think of to say.

The conversational impasse was ended by the silent entrance of Juan. Indoors, Juan looked even larger than he had outside — his swarthy head reminding the redhead of a pineapple mounted atop a giant pineapple-shaped cactus.

"They are gone, *senora*," he told his mistress.

"You may turn in, then," Medora told him and he departed as silently as he had entered.

"Mr. Shayne," she said after finishing her drink. "May I call you Mike since you are to be my bodyguard?"

"Of course — Medora." *Bodyguard!* He hadn't taken the assignment to bodyguard Medora Martinssen but to find out who was putting an obeah curse on her. But he decided to let it ride.

She said, "I was impressed when Knight told me he had hired you. I have heard of you since I was a schoolgirl in Coral Gables. Mike Shayne, the dashing, daring redhead who brings criminals to justice."

"Is this a put-on?" he asked, embarrassed.

She shook her golden head. "It's true — Mike. Now, I want you to drive me somewhere. I must talk to someone who should be able to tell me what is happening."

"As you wish — Medora." Inwardly, he groaned. The thought of action, even of taking a drive, seemed beyond his strength at the moment. But the drink she had mixed him was doing wonders for his stomach. He finished it, slid off the barstool on which he was sitting, added, "Where to?"

"I'll direct you." She led the way to a huge hall closet, where she covered her white strapless evening gown with a trench coat. Walking behind her, he noted that the top of her spun-gold head barely reached his diaphragm.

As he got the Buick under way, she curled up in the right hand front seat like a little girl after giving him directions toward the southwest corner of the city, to an area with which he was relatively unacquainted. The night air was soft and sweet, and the detective felt himself reviving with each turn of the radials beneath the big car.

It was a good thing, too. They had not proceeded half a mile before he became aware they had a tail. . .

He tested the pursuer, making a pair of unnecessary turns to check him out. Twice, the following headlights fell behind, only to move up to medium close.

"Company?" she asked.

"Looks like," Shayne replied. "Can you give me any reason?"

She lit a cigaret, then said, "Oh, dear! Where to begin? This probably sounds silly to you — but do you believe in obeah?"

"No," he replied. "I don't believe in it, but I know it exists."

"You're lucky, Mike. I was brought up with it on the family plantation. Most of the help believed in it. There was an old voodoo queen up in the hills above our house. My nurse used to take me there. It was fun for a little girl — but kind of scary, too."

"So. . .?" he asked, checking the rearview mirror in time to see the tailing car cut off to the left.

"I'm taking you to an obeah queen," Medora replied. "Her name is Andrea — Andrea Gorges. She is the granddaughter of the old lady in the hills, and she is very powerful. I believe my husband needs her help."

"Interesting," he replied. "Oh-oh!" He slowed as they came to a brief stretch of road under repair, bounced slowly over a dirt bypass before reattaining the smooth

pavement beyond.

"*Damn!*" she said softly but fervently as a bump nearly jolted her out of her seat. "That's something new."

"Not to our friends." Shayne nodded toward a car that cut in ahead of them from a side road. It was evident to him that their pursuers must have known about the under-construction stretch and employed it to bypass them and get the lead. He looked for a turn-off but there was none beyond which the other car had used.

Their cypress-lined route curved sharply to the left, and the detective was forced to brake hurriedly lest he T-bone the dark sedan that blocked their passage midway around the curve.

As he reached for the gun in the dashboard compartment, he risked a quick glance at his companion. She was leaning forward, her lips parted, apparently prepared to relish the action ahead. Mike Shayne pushed her down in her seat, thinking of the Roman matrons who had once thrilled to the gory dismemberments of the Coliseum.

None too soon, as it turned out, as a bullet cracked through the windshield between them, leaving a clean hole.

There was barely room for a car to pass on the right, where a ten-foot gap separated the blockading vehicle's rear bumper from the road's cypress border. The redhead skidded expertly while rub-

ber screeched in protest, ducking low as a second bullet holed the windshield of the Buick and whined inches from his scalp. He bulled ahead to the right, spurted past the other car and paused just long enough to send a jacketed .45-caliber slug from his Colt through a rear tire that blew with a crack louder than that of a handgun.

Then he was past, skidded right, straightened and was off and around the curve before their would-be ambushers had a chance to shift sides and take a third shot at them.

His tiny blonde companion looked up at him admiringly and said, "My God, but you're quick!"

"Necessity," the redhead replied, makes strange bedfellows."

He wondered, briefly, how Medora would take the remark, which was strictly off the cuff, was reassured by a quick suppressed gurgle of laughter. Then, the young woman said in her odd accent — a melange of old-fashioned Deep South and Latin American — "Take the third left, then the second right. I'll tell you where to pull up."

The short driveway in which he braked to a halt was completely unlit save for the Buick's headlights. He turned them off and, when his vision had adjusted to the Stygian gloom, was barely able to make out the black bulk of a fair

sized dwelling.

He had expected a skull-topped altar, mystic signs and substances on the walls, incantations at least. Instead, after a few minutes of further colloquy in Spanish, the *madam* asked the girl, who was standing by, to bring her some tea.

It arrived moments later, steaming hot, in what looked like an old-fashioned glass, which the girl placed in a saucer on a small table that stood at the obeah queen's elbow. She closed her eyes briefly and held her right hand, palm down, over the hot glass.

After a half minute or so of silence, she lifted it, glanced at the redhead, then resumed her conversation in Spanish with his client's wife. Medora replied in the same tongue and again he was at a loss.

Finally, Andrea Gorges turned to him, her eyes large and dark, and said, "Senor Shayne, I must warn you you are involved in a game very dark and very, very dangerous. But you have already been warned. All I can tell you is to be extremely careful, for you cannot tell where and when your enemies will strike next."

"That," said the redhead, "sounds like par for the course."

"You joke." The words were a reproach.

"I'm not joking," Mike Shayne replied. "I don't suppose anyone ever gets used to facing danger, and I have had to face enough of it to know how it feels."

"You like it, Shayne?" The question was a threat.

He shook his head. "No, but at times it goes with the job."

She nodded, apparently satisfied, then said, "That I accept. But this is a new kind of danger. It does not necessarily strike at the body. It may strike at the mind as well. Remember this at all times."

"I'm not apt to forget," he assured her. The little voodoo queen was impressive, he thought, especially in her cure for a disordered stomach. After a few more moments of conversation in Spanish between the two women, Medora Martinssen led him back to the car.

"Home, Mike," she said wearily.

"What about your husband? Is he going to be okay?"

"Andrea says he's going to be fine, thank God," she replied.

"You believe her?" the redhead asked.

"Why not? She has never been wrong."

For some reason, this reply jolted Mike Shayne. If Andrea Gorges had never been wrong, then he was going to be in danger and from sources unpredictable. He felt a chill in his marrow, brushed it away with thought of the fact that the car which had tried to waylay them had hardly been a manifestation of the spirit.

He clung to this thought all the way back to Medora's big Bal Harbour estate and back to his own

more modest digs. At one point, after leaving Medora, he actually thought wistfully of Lucy's Aunt Polly...

"Wait here." He could barely make out her whisper as his companion slipped from the right front seat, closing the car door softly behind her. Then he was alone.

He heard soft footsteps climb a few steps, the distant ring of a doorbell inside the edifice, then saw a narrow line of light widen to silhouette Medora's tiny figure against its brightness. After a brief, inaudible conversation, she returned to the car, said, "Come on in, Mike. The *madam* wished to see you."

Inside the house, the redhead noted the efficiency with which the windows had been blocked by black cloth shades so that no light would leak. Otherwise, the house was modern, cooled by air conditioning.

Andrea Gorges, the voodoo queen from El Salvador, greeted him warmly with a heavily accented, "Ah, Mike Shayne. I have heard much about you. You are welcome to this *casa*."

Andrea was as short as his companion, but with a chunky, efficient looking south-of-the-Border body beneath a flat featured face that approached beauty when, as now, she smiled. White teeth flashed in contrast to brilliant dark eyes, deep set in their sockets.

Shayne accepted her hand, found it softly muscular, said,

"I'm sorry, but I only heard about you this afternoon — from Lieutenant Olmeda."

As a deliberate shot, it failed to work. Andrea Gorges shrugged without losing her smile, said, "Ah, yes, Lieutenant Olmeda — I have attended some of his lectures. A very learned man — for an outsider. Come in and sit down."

They entered a living room with comfortable furniture and the detective sat on a sofa while the two ladies engaged in a rapid-fire Spanish conversation that his limited knowledge of the tongue failed woefully to comprehend.

After a few moments, a young girl in a dark blue muumuu entered with a tray of drinks and totopos. Shayne accepted his glass and tasted it in a gingerly fashion as his stomach, while much improved, was still unstable.

The liquid seemed at first to be straight fruit juice — all he could think of was clouded nectarine juice. But as a second sip joined the first, the redhead felt a delicious warmth invade his stomach, a warmth that spread and glowed with each succeeding swallow.

Apparently reading his reaction, Medora Martinssen's lips twitched as she looked at him and said, "This is a very special remedy from my own country. Nobody makes it as well as Andrea."

"You flatter me, *senora*," said the obeah queen modestly. Then, to the detective, "It will do you no

harm. On the contrary . . . ”

“I am grateful,” Shayne told her, wondering what in hell this was all about.

IV

MEDORA MARTINSSÉN looked spent when Shayne dropped her off at her well guarded front door. Her small mouth looked tense at the corners and dark rings underlay her eyes. Juan, who had opened the door, stood behind her like a hulking stone sentinel. Only his eyes, which glowered at the detective, hinted at humanity beneath.

She said, “Thanks, Mike. I hope you’re feeling better. I must call the hospital. I’d go there, but the doctor says there’s no use. Poor Knight will be incommunicado till tomorrow.”

“I hope you sleep well,” the detective told her.

She shrugged, removing her tiny hand from his paw. “I hope so, too — but don’t bet on it.”

Shayne got back into the Buick and turned around to head for the gate. In his rearview mirror, he could see the silhouette of Juan in the doorway, watching his departure. He thought, *Who needs guard dogs with that character on-hand?*

It had been his intention to drive directly to his apartment and seek rest in sleep. But a glance at the dashboard clock revealed the time as 11:14 and either the drink Me-

dora had given him or that offered by Andrea Gorges, or both, had cured his sick stomach. He felt ravenous but no longer queasy.

Almost without volition, he headed for an address given him by Eli Tanner at Police Headquarters earlier — that of the West Indian Temple Foundation, the organization home of Marie Lascelles, otherwise Brenda, the established voodoo queen of the Miami area. It lay close to the downtown zone, less than a mile from his own apartment.

In contrast to Andrea’s relatively humble dwelling, that of Brenda was impressive — a grey, white-pillared Doric facade fronting a three-story office building. Shayne recalled it as belonging to the Scientology movement before that burgeoning faith had moved to larger quarters, before that as the home of a faith-healing cult that had flourished briefly to die under police pressure.

There was a light burning over a small door flanking the temple steps and the detective rang the bell. Moments later, it was opened and a towering figure said, “Who is there?” in deep gutteral accents, adding, “The temple is closed.”

Another voice sounded behind the tall guardian. “Admit Mr. Shayne, Jeannette. It’s okay.”

Jeannette! As he moved past the gigantic gatekeeper, Shayne saw that it was indeed a woman, black as ink, clad in a flowing dark

robe that totally concealed the body beneath. Jeannette scowled down at him, her head topped with ringlets laid flat against her scalp. She towered over the detective's six-one by at least five inches.

In contrast, the woman who had ordered him admitted stood a mere five feet five or so, allowing for heels. She wore her bronze hair shoulder length and her face, with its broad thin mouth and high cheekbones and tilting green eyes was arrestingly beautiful. She was clad in a grey pants suit and carried a long cigaret in a longer ivory holder.

Briskly, she led him to a small private elevator, "I was going to call you in the morning, Mr. Shayne. I'm glad you came to see me tonight."

Her English was accented — French, he decided — her manner was cool, her perfume subtle and since he failed to recognize the scent, probably custom blended. She led him to a third-story living room equipped with a cellarette, offered him a drink, which he accepted.

This time he recognized the libation — it was Martell cognac, as the label on the bottle promised, well iced and only lightly laced with water. She poured herself a double cointreau before seating herself opposite him across a railed oval coffee table well equipped with silver coasters and cigaret cases and silver ashtrays. He noted as she sat down that she

wore long silver chain earrings.

Pointing to a corner of the room, she indicated a device just under the ceiling alongside the drawn velvet drapes. With a soft laugh, she said, "If you wonder how I knew you were downstairs . . ."

She pressed a button under the table and the device lit up to reveal a view of the entryway downstairs, remarked, "So much for voodoo magic."

"But, according to what I have learned today, Ms. Lascelles, you are the established obeah queen of Miami."

"Garnish!" She dismissed it with a gesture. "The purpose of my foundation is to give sorely needed assistance to emigres from the islands who arrive here almost daily with nothing but hope. I and my assistants see to it that they are housed, fed, receive medical attention and jobs. I receive support from those who have already prospered and from a surprising number of non-emigres who recognize the value of our work in the community."

"Then the voodoo is window dressing?" the redhead said when she paused to sip her drink.

Marie Lascelles made a negative gesture as she put down her glass. "Window dressing, *non!*" She spoke emphatically. "I practice the magic — white magic. It is very important to my people. It gives them comfort, the protection of home in a strange land. If ne-

cessary, I cast the spells — but only if necessary."

"Earlier this evening," he told her, "I was taken to see Andrea Gorges. And before that, Lieutenant Olmeda at Police Headquarters informed me that she is a rival of yours."

"To date, I have tolerated her," Marie Lascelles replied, her nostrils curling in scorn. "I have not considered her dangerous. But if I ever do" — she leaned forward, causing the dark silk jersey beneath her jacket to fill seductively — "I shall swat her like a fly."

"The police seem to think she may be dangerous," Shayne told her. "They call her more aggressive than you."

"Mr. Shayne." It was a statement, not preamble. "I know all about your visit to Headquarters this afternoon. I know all about your visit to Andrea Gorges. I even know that you had trouble on the way there. No, this is not magic, either. I am fantastically well informed. And I can tell you that your client, *Monsieur Martinssen*, will recover."

"But how . . . ?" For once in his life, the redhead felt stopped — cold.

"Never mind how, Mr. Shayne. I am troubled, too. There is danger afloat — and both you and I are involved — deeply involved. I, because I am Brenda, you because you are involved with *Monsieur*

She paused to sip her liqueur, looked at him narrowly over the

rim of her small glass. "But when I do find out, Mr. Shayne, rest assured that I shall deal with it. And that I shall use every means I possess to eliminate the threat — even to black magic. Also, Mr. Shayne, be certain that I have the power to do so."

It seemed to the detective that, as Marie-Brenda delivered this ultimatum, the atmosphere of the air-conditioned room thickened and grew even cooler than it was. For the second time since he had accepted the case, he felt a gnawing chill grip his vitals, a chill something very like fear.

Then, as Brenda smiled and put down her glass, the chill vanished, the air cleared. With a soft laugh, his hostess said, "You must pardon me, Mr. Shayne, for my melodramatics. I fear it is part of my heritage. You see, I am a native of Martinique, and obeah got its start in the slave plantations there almost three centuries ago."

"You take it seriously then?" he asked.

She shrugged, met his gaze full-on, replied, "It is part of my heritage." After a few further moments of conversation, Jeannette reappeared in answer to some silent summons and he bade Marie-Brenda farewell. In the elevator, he glanced at his towering companion, wondering just how he would handle her if the two of them ever got into a hand-to hand combat.

She met his regard, growled, "Let's hope you never find out, redhead."

He was glad to get out of the elevator alive. . .

This time, he drove directly home and turned in for the night. His stomach felt on a solid footing, but his head ached faintly — both from fatigue after his unexpected series of ordeals and from hunger. He made himself a solid sandwich of lettuce and cold roast beef, washed it down with a glass of milk and cognac and went to bed to sleep the sound sleep of the unjust. . .

When Mike Shayne awoke, the morning sunlight shone brightly through his bedroom window curtains and the phone was ringing. Captain Eli Tanner's voice growled, "God damn it, Mike, are you trying to poison the whole loving department?"

The redhead shook the trailing mists of slumber from his head and managed to utter a significant, "Huh?"

"Huh, schmuh!" said Tanner. "Get your ass down here as fast as you can."

There was that in the captain's tone which suggested to the detective he had better comply. Twenty-two minutes later, fingering a sprout of stubble under the angle of his jaw that his electric razor had missed in his hurry, he entered the Fraud and Bunco captain's office.

For a moment he thought it a re-

play of the afternoon before. Eli Tanner sat hunched behind his desk, Lieutenant Olmeda in a chair alongside. Then he noted the grey-green pallor both men wore, the look of injured accusation in their eyes.

"Oh, no!" he said, sinking into another chair. "Not both of you, too!"

"What do you mean — *too*!?" Tanner rasped. "I don't know about you, Shayne, but we've both been sick as dogs — all night. When the lieutenant called to ask me how I felt, I couldn't believe it. Now you say 'too.' Come across."

"All I know is I shot my dinner in a parking lot and felt like an inverted knothole afterward," the redhead replied. "So why blame me?"

"We got thinking about it," Olmeda offered.

"You mean *you* got thinking about it," said his superior. "Mike, about four this morning, between bouts of throwing up, my colleague here had sense enough to call the lab and tell them about that darling little voodoo doll you brought in here yesterday. We had it sent down to be tested. We're waiting for the results now." A pause, then, "You're on the level about being sick, Mike?"

"Scout's honor," Shayne assured them. "I thought my whole gut was going to come up."

"You look okay now," Tanner said suspiciously. "How come? You handled that loving voodoo

image more than we did."

The redhead hesitated. Then he said, "I ran into a little luck there. I was lucky enough to get a drink from one of the embattled voodoo queens and, so help me, it fixed me up."

"I wish you'd let your friends know." Tanner sounded injured. "You might have let us in on it."

Shayne sighed, shook his head, said, "Hell, fellows, I didn't even know you were sick. I didn't know what knocked *me* out. The damn drink tasted like nectarine juice."

"Think he's putting us on?" Tanner spoke to Olmeda, barely covered a burp.

Olmeda went greyer, muttered, "*Nectarine juice!*"

The desk phone *brrred* and Captain Tanner picked it up. He listened, said, "Jesus Christ! You're sure?" Then, "What about nectarine juice?" Another pause, then, "Go to hell!" He slammed down the instrument, glared at the redhead.

"For your information," he said, "that loving little figurine you handed us was covered with some sort of dried extract of oleander root. In case you didn't know—I didn't till just now—the pretty little oleander shrub is a potentially deadly poison in all its parts. We could all of us die."

"Well, we didn't." Shayne felt a little encouragement might lighten the gloom.

"No thanks to you," said Tanner.

"What about — nectarine juice?" Olmeda's voice was weak and uncertain.

"Bleeker, at the lab, suggested we try prune juice and shove it you know where. He said there's no known antidote except an emetic. And who in hell needs an emetic after what we've gone through?" He eyed Shayne narrowly, added, "Who was this voodoo queen that gave you the juice?"

"It was Andrea Gorges, the El Salvador one," the redhead told them. "Honest to God, fellows, that's what it tasted like."

"Well chalk up one for Andrea," said Olmeda. "That's the first plus I've heard in her favor. Hey, maybe she knows because she put the crap on the doll."

"Maybe." Tanner's increased vehemence suggested he was well on the road to recovery. "It's a wonder we're any of us alive. Bleeker says, if it were any stronger, it could of given us a heart attack."

"Oh my God!" said Shayne.

"What?" The query came from both detectives simultaneously.

"My client!" said Shayne. "He was carted to a hospital in an ambulance last night. And he handled the doll first. I'd better be going, gentlemen."

"You'd better run like hell" said Tanner, "before one of us catches up with you . . ."

Martinssen. I have not yet pinpointed the quarter from which this danger comes, because I do not believe Andrea has the power."

V

AT THE HOSPITAL, there was some hesitation about admitting Shayne to visit his client. The doctor came out to talk to the detective in a waiting room. He was a grey-haired, middle-aged gentleman who looked as if he had been born in his high-collared white jacket. His pink-and-white face was grave, his dark eyes worried behind gold-rimmed glasses.

He said, "Mr. Martinssen is a very sick man, Mr. Shayne. Until we have concluded his diagnosis, I am not sure it would be wise for him to have any visitors."

"Isn't diagnosis unusually slow?" the detective inquired.

The physician hesitated, then nodded, "The problem is, the patient has no previous record of any heart problem — which is why we are seeking some other cause for his attack. And that can take time."

"Perhaps I can help," the redhead offered. "Have you tested for oleander poisoning?"

The medico came to the alert. "You know something?" he asked sharply.

"I believe so, doctor. Try it on for size."

"If you're right . . ." The phys-

ician turned, then turned back, said, "Wait right here, Mr. Shayne — please."

He was gone approximately twenty minutes. When he returned, he nodded, said, "Have you any idea how he got it?"

"I have an idea. But right now that is privileged information — at least until I can talk to my client. I can tell you this much — it was not taken internally."

"I see." A long pause, then, "Very well, you may see him. But not for long. And try not to excite him in any way."

The redhead gave his word and was at last admitted. Knight Martinssen, propped up on a trio of hospital pillows, looked like a pallid ghost of the healthy man the detective had visited the previous afternoon. He managed a weak smile and said, "Glad to see you, Mike. They just gave me something that tasted worse than whatever ails me. But it seems to be working. Jesus, man — have I been sick!"

"I know. I had a touch of it myself."

"I don't follow." It was obvious effort for the importer to frown.

The redhead told him, "That damned voodoo doll was coated with a poisonous distillation of oleander root. The police lab just discovered it. Everyone who touched it came down with it — first you, then me, then a couple of detectives I left it with down at Headquarters."

"You brought the police in?" Martinssen moved restlessly beneath the covers.

"I had to leave it with them. Relax, they don't know you're involved in any way. But I needed local voodoo background and had to consult them. Incidentally, right now they love me like Satan himself. But you're out of it."

"Why did it hit me so hard?"

"Apparently, because you handled it first and got the heaviest pickup," the detective assured him. "But don't worry — it's not your heart and the rest of us have recovered. So you ought to be okay in a few days."

"Thank God!" Relief eased the sick man's features, to be replaced by new concern. "Medora," he asked. "How is *she*? if anything. . . ."

Shayne said, "She's okay so far. Mostly worried about you." Shayne omitted any mention of the shooting incident of the night before.

"Promise me you'll take care of her, Shayne. *Promise* me:" This as the doctor appeared in the door.

"I promise," Shayne told him. He waved as cheerful a salute as he could muster while he went out the door.

Before leaving the hospital, he called the Martinssen mansion from a booth. Juan answered the call, to be followed by Medora. He told her her husband was much better.

"Oh, grace be to God!" she replied. "I'd like to talk to you, Mike. Can you get out here?"

"I'll be there as soon as I can. Be careful."

"Don't worry, I will." A pause, then, "Why won't they let me see my husband?"

"They will," he promised. "Probably tomorrow." He hung up, then called Phil Davison at home. His former client was in, said, "What can I do for you?"

"Fill me in on Knight Martinssen if you can spare the time."

"Come on over. I'll give you what I can."

Davison lived in a fine Twenties-built brick mansion in a jealously guarded enclave of established opulence all but surrounded by new construction in what had formerly been a prime residential part of the city of Miami. Shayne had to pass inspection by a uniformed security guard before a gate was lifted to admit him to perhaps a half square mile of winding drives and elegant lawns and barriers of cypress and privet amid which fine old houses stood in semi-isolated splendor.

Phil Davison, a short chunky man who radiated bonhomie, admitted the detective himself and uttered a pleased, "Long time no see. How's my friend, Knight?"

Enjoying a Napoleon on the rocks — his host was out of Martell — the redhead told him something of what had happened. Dav-

ison grimaced over his own Scotch and soda, shook his head. "It just goes to show you," he said. "A guy wants his wife protected and he's the one who gets hit."

"You never know." Mike Shayne shrugged. "Tell me about Knight. He seems like a hell of a nice character."

"He is. We went to school together at Chapel Hill. Knight was dead serious about getting ahead, but he wanted to make it on ability *not* by skinning anyone else. His family was poor as churchmice, but he made it." There was pride of association in Davison's voice.

The gist of it, according to Davison, was that Martinssen had deliberately opted for a career in the tropics, saying, "The opportunities are greater there for anyone who can stand the climate. And it can't get much hotter or muggier down there than it does in the Carolinas."

After graduating from college and a business course, he had been hired by Dunlap Plantations, El Salvador and Miami, then in extremely rickety shape. In the course of ten years' hard and intelligent toil, Knight Martinssen had restored them to more than their pristine prosperity and become executive chief of the complex operation with a seat on the board.

Somewhere along the line, he had married Medora Martinssen, thus further cementing his bonds to the control echelon. "Not that

Knight Martinssen was ever on the make," Davison assured the redhead. "He brought her up here to visit us when they became engaged — my wife and I went down there later to stand up for them at the altar. If ever I saw a love match, theirs was it. Such a pretty little thing, and so in love with him. And he worshipped the ground she walked on."

Mike Shayne decided to lay it on the table. He told her why Knight Martinssen had hired him, about the feathered warnings he had picked up in her bedroom, about the doll and what had happened when he turned it in.

"So," he concluded, "it was hardly a miracle that I was able to diagnose the cause of his attack."

She had been listening in intent silence. Now she said, "But why didn't he tell *me*?"

"He didn't want you to worry, Medora," the redhead said softly. "He was afraid, with your Salvadorean background, that you might be frightened."

"He should have told me," Medora insisted. "Why, I've been brought up on voodoo! For every curse, there is a counter curse. Even if I don't know them all, I know whom to turn to."

"Andrea?" he asked.

"Of course." She paused, sighed, said, "I should have guessed. So poor darling Knight all but sacrificed himself to keep me from worry." She paused, the tip of her tongue licked her tiny

lips. Then, unexpectedly, she giggled.

The detective's incredulity must have been apparent, for she added, "I'm sorry — it's not time to laugh. But when I think of those poor policeman. . . ."

She giggled again and Shayne found himself smiling. He said, "I hope you won't ask any favors of the Miami Police Department for a while. Those boys are hurting. And they don't like it."

"Brenda!" Medora Martinssen all but spat the name. Her mirth had vanished as suddenly as it appeared, to be replaced by white fury. "That dreadful bitch! If it ever gets out, she'll try to blame it on poor Andrea. I must warn her."

Medora reached for a phone, tapped out a number, spoke at some length in Spanish. When she hung up, her thin nostrils were distended. She said, "There's going to be trouble, Mike. Andrea's not going to take it lying down."

Nor had there, as far as Davison knew, ever been even a rumor of a rift in the lute since. Finishing a second drink, the detective thanked his former client and took his leave. His next call — the doting bride. . . .

The gates to the Martinssen mansion were locked, and the detective had to ask for admission via a voice box affixed to one of the pillars that supported the gilt-tipped iron gates. A deep voice with a heavy accent — Shayne took it to be the hulking Juan —

told him to wait.

As he sat there, he noted two black-and-white Siberian huskies who sat at one side of the driveway just inside the gates. They were immobile, made no sound, but their clipped ears were on the alert, their dark eyes fixed upon him. When the gates opened inward, and he drove through, the redhead half-expected them to assault the car.

They did not move a whisker as he drove past. . . .

Again, Medora greeted him at the open front door. She wore a white pique dress, cut low in front and short of skirt, revealing most of her small firm breasts and slim, shapely legs.

When he got out of the Buick, she took both his hands in hers and, looking up at him, said, "Knight says you saved his life. I'm so grateful."

She was appealing, no doubt about it, and inevitably Mike Shayne wondered just how far her gratefulness would go. As she led him inside, he sensed that she was flashing signs with every twitch of her bottom. It made him wonder, just how ideal that made-in-heaven marriage of the Martinssens actually was.

But there was no overt ploy. She made them drinks in the small room they had used the night before. Seated close to him, she said, "Mike, how did you know what was wrong with my husband?"

Mike Shayne had an uncomfort-

able sensation of having just removed the padlock from a Pandora's box. If a war between voodoo queens was imminent, he did not wish to be the person who had lit the powder train. He had a feeling, however, that the damage was already done.

Once again he wished he had gone to Tampa with Lucy — Aunt Polly and all . . .

Since he was still in Knight Martinssen's employ and since his client had hired him to protect his wife and discover her persecutors, he offered to stand by and help. But Medora brushed him off.

"Thank you, Mike," she said gently but firmly. "With Juan and the other servants, and the dogs, I am well protected here. That is, at least against any physical threat. Against other threats, you could hardly help." She took both his big hands in her tiny ones, added, "Besides, there is no need for you to risk injury against witchcraft."

She spoke matter-of-factly, as if magic were an accepted fact of life. Any trace of her earlier coquettishness had vanished. There was no doubting her sincerity. The detective rose with her and, after thanking her for the drink, took his leave. Juan, still reminding the redhead of a pineapple head mounted on a giant pineapple cactus, saw him to his car.

"If you need help," Shayne told him, "call me. I'm in the book."

"Of course, Senor Shayne," the big man growled. Something deri-

sive in his tone caused the detective to realize what he meant was "*That will be the day!*"

He drove out of the estate, trying to remember if he had ever before been dismissed by a client for his own protection, was unable to think of a single previous case. In a very real way, he found it humiliating.

He did not see the guard dogs as he drove out . . .

Shortly after six, he met Tim Rourke again at The Beef House. By this time his stomach was ravenous for food — he had not eaten since his upset of the previous night and could actually feel the few drinks he had taken.

Along with a further quartet of double Martells on the rocks, he fortified his empty innards with a large bowl of turtle soup, a two-inch-thick slab of roast beef tenderloin with rissole potatoes and again asparagus, plus an order of split and toasted French rolls with sweet butter.

During the meal, his reporter friend, who opted for a double order of brisket of beef and a pot of baked beans to support his string-bean figure, told Shayne what he had gleaned from the *Daily News* morgue about the Martinssens and voodoo operations in New Orleans. Apart from the fact that Marie Lescelles — Brenda — was even more entrenched in Miami than he had supposed, there was little the redhead did not already know.

Exhausted, he returned home fairly early and turned in, his whole body aching for slumber. Nothing, he told himself as he buried his telephone under a cushion and thrust it beneath the bed, was going to interrupt his sleep.

But something did — the hideous nightmare of Brenda that all but drew him from his bedroom and over the fire escape railing...

VI

AS SHAYNE SLOWLY drank his milk-and-rum at the kitchenette table, the trip of his nightmare slowly faded. Although the Miami air was warm, he shivered. He was still bathed in sweat, and his sweat was ice cold, although the fury that raged within him was hot.

Unquestionably, the seductive image that had so nearly drawn him toward serious accident or death had been the face of Marie Lascelles — Brenda, the established voodoo queen of Miami. Reaching for a telephone, he dialed information, got the number of the institute. A mechanical sounding answering device responded to his call, asking him to leave a message at the sound of a tone.

He hung up, shivering, asked for Brenda at the same address, then for Marie Lascelles — to be told that neither number was listed.

He sat there, hand on the cradled phone, frowning, trying to ex-

plain to his own satisfaction why Brenda-Marie would want him injured or dead. There had been no hint of personal antagonism in her interview the night before. Yet he felt sure Brenda had been here, in his apartment.

Why was he so sure? He scowled at the dregs in his glass, seeking a clue to that assurance. It was fragmentary, growing more so. Yet the assurance remained. Elusive...

During daylight hours, Shayne could have obtained the established voodoo queen's unlisted numbers. But not at — he glanced toward the wall clock — 3:26 in the morning. He rose, moved toward the door of the apartment, halted abruptly in the entry, sniffed.

It was still there — a trace of scent, faintly exotic but definitely associated in his memory with his visit to Marie Lascelles' headquarters. Was it, too, illusion? He sniffed again.

It was faint, but still there, lingering in the air.

And there was something else, even more unsubstantial. . . . the memory of a soft, low-pitched female laugh that had assailed his eardrums faintly while he lay, half stunned by his fall and rude awakening, on the bedroom carpet. There had been a note of exultation in the sound.

But why exultation? Had it been because the female laughing was amused at his befuddled plight?

Or had she been relieved that the deadly vision had been broken in time to save him from injury?

A whisper of perfume, a half-memory of a laugh . . . the redhead snorted in his frustration. These were the sort of solid leads on which a Mike Shayne could take action? More than ever, he felt he was swimming in glycerin.

Yet every muscle in his body tensed — indication that action was necessary. For either of the voodoo queens to have induced such a vision — no matter how — was proof that he was dangerous to someone, that he was wanted out of the way. The problem was — what do do?

He returned to the kitchen, poured himself a second mixture of brandy and rich milk, again reached for the phone. He almost dialed his client's number to consult with Medora Martinssen, then decided not to disturb her. After all, she could hardly furnish the sort of hard information he needed.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, made up his mind. Since he could not reach Brenda, he would move to the other flank. He dialed the number of Andrea Gorges, let it ring eleven times. Again, there was no answer.

Shayne sat there for perhaps half a minute, then rose to his feet and shed his robe en route to the bathroom. He showered, donned slacks and a pullover shirt, fitted his shoulder rig before

shrugging into a glen plaid jacket. He checked out his Colt .45, slipped an extra clip into each side pocket. His soft leather loafers barely whispered as he left the apartment and took the elevator down to the garage.

Although the pursuing car did not turn on its headlights immediately, the redhead caught a flicker of movement in his rearview mirror as he turned left leaving the ramp and headed for the southwestern district. When it passed under the corner streetlight, following him, he got a clearer view.

It was a maroon sedan, probably a Jaguar from the tilt and shape of its radiator. Shortly afterward, its headlights came on, well back of him.

The redhead did not hurry — nor did he take evasive action. If they wanted to tangle with him, he was ready.

He worked his way slowly toward Andrea's house. One of the reasons he was in no hurry was because he had no real idea why he was going there or what he hoped to learn. He was heading in her direction for two reasons — one, the induced vision that had so nearly done him injury seemed to demand action. The other lay in the simple fact that he had no other place to go.

When he passed the long cypress-bordered curve, his tail was no longer behind him. Shayne found the fact more disturbing than closer pursuit would have

been. It suggested his shadow knew where he was headed and was satisfied.

He began to wonder what was awaiting him at Andrea's. Long-honed instinct told him that it was nothing pleasant and his right hand left the wheel to feel the butt of the Colt in his shoulder holster...

No other cars were parked in front of the house when he pulled into the driveway. In the twin circles of his headlights, the garage doors yawned empty at the end of the short stretch of private road. The detective cut his motor and lights and waited, hoping for some sound or sight that would guide his next move.

Nothing, save the whisper of faint breeze in the cypresses that marked the driveway...

Not wishing to rupture the stillness, Mike Shayne got out of the Buick quietly, closed the car door softly behind him. The house was dark but this was to be expected. He remembered the tightly drawn shades of the night before. The moon had set and the only illumination came faintly from the stars and from a distant street lamp mostly blanketed by the tall trees.

Apparently alarmed by the soft sounds of his approach, some small animal scurried away through the dichondra, the barely audible sound causing him to leap. He paused for another deep breath, silently cursing the fact that the case weighed so heavily

on his nerves.

He filled his lungs once more, stepped onto the porch and pushed the bell button beside the doorframe. It sounded faint, hollow, as if it echoed through the house — nor did any other echoes answer its summons.

Shayne hesitated, then tried the knob. It turned without sound in his hand. He pushed the door open. The front hall was dark but there was faint light from an inner room, light which flickered faintly in the draft created by the opening of the door.

Candles! he thought, and for some reason the knowledge disturbed him. For the moment, he had had his fill of voodoo in all its forms.

He slipped inside, drawing his pistol as he did so. He thought of announcing his presence, decided against it, took a deep breath and moved toward the flickering light. The living room was dark as he passed it. A faint glow came from the door beyond it on the right hand side of the hall. Shayne tiptoed to the doorway and cautiously peered inside.

Andrea's tiny form, stark naked, lay atop a bed. A septet of lighted tapers stood on the shelves that bordered its head and on the shelf that united them, above. Once again, Shayne was aware of the voodoo queen's tininess, as well as of the fact that her body was beautiful, even in death.

From almost the center of her

breast, the haft of a knife protruded. It must have entered her heart with near-surgical accuracy, for there was almost no blood around the blackening wound. There were traces of incense in the air.

Mike Shayne knew that he was looking upon a ritual murder. . . .

His grey eyes scanned the room quickly, searching for a phone, spotted one on the carpet close by the bed, seated solidly in its cradle.

The hairs on the back of his neck prickled. . . .

His every sense alert, he moved to the telephone, noting that death had been fairly recent since the body's perfume was as yet unsoiled. He reached for the phone, then withdrew his hand, remembering the young girl acolyte that had served the drinks during his previous visit.

Where was she? Was she dead, like her mistress, or had she played a part in the deadly ritual?

Shayne decided to look through the house before phoning the police. He continued to move warily although the absolute silence, apart from his own breathing, strongly suggested no one else was present.

In size, it was a medium cottage — six rooms on a single floor. It took the redhead only a few minutes to satisfy himself that he and the corpse were alone there.

Again he reached for the phone, again he failed to make a call.

This time, all hell shattered the silence of the night. First a car braked loudly in front of the dwelling, then a door slammed and footsteps approached, making no effort at concealment.

Mike Shayne swung about to meet the invader, crouching, holding his automatic with both hands as he swung it toward the bedroom door. He heard advancing steps of the newcomer drawing closer, prepared to squeeze the trigger. . . . only to be half-blinded by the sudden glare of a large flashlight thrust around the jamb of the door, followed by the bright flash of a shot.

He fired back, twice, hit nothing, then dropped alongside the bed, fighting to regain his vision.

He caught a half-glimpse of movement behind the light and fired again, this time had the satisfaction of hearing a yelp of pain and alarm. If the .45 slug had been on target, its impact must have shattered something. . . .

VII

MIKE SHAYNE dropped to the carpet on the far side of the bed — and barely in time as another shot blasted from the doorway, the bullet winging above him to thud into the wall. He risked another shot, firing upward around the foot of the bed, heard breaking glass as it struck a picture hanging in the hall beyond.

Silence followed, silence broken

for the redhead only by the sound of his own breathing and, more faintly, that of his invisible would-be killer. It was stalemate, enduring as the seconds ticked silently past.

Shayne was considering his next move — either frontal attack or an attempt to sneak out of the room by a rear door in the corner in an effort to get behind his assailant by moving around the house outside. The second maneuver seemed preferable, but it occurred to him that the door might open into a closet, thus leaving him deeper in the trap.

He wished to hell he had had time to explore the cottage more thoroughly . . .

The silence continued, tightening his nerve pressure with each second. . . . and then it was broken by the sound of a distant siren. The police were on their way. Briefly, Shayne wondered who had called them.

There was another aimless shot from the hall door, followed by the rush of footsteps retreating on the run. Evidently, the redhead's assailant had heard the siren as well and was taking to his heels.

Shayne scrambled to his feet and took after him. As he raced from the bedroom, his left heel slipped on a small pool of blood, causing him to crash against the wall of the brief corridor, all but knocking the wind out of his lungs. By the time he reached the front door, his attacker was scrambling

into his car from the far side.

Evidently he had left the motor running, because he was off in a spurt of screaming rubber before the detective could get in more than a single shot that was wide of the moving target.

The sirens sounded closer.

Getting to his own car, getting it started, getting it backed out of the driveway, took further precious seconds. He took off after it, more than a hundred yards behind, in a direction away from the rapidly approaching police car.

Whoever was driving the sedan ahead obviously knew how to handle it. Even with the Buick at full throttle, Shayne failed to shorten the distance between the vehicles. The Buick skidded around a half dozen turns before the car ahead roared up an expressway ramp and was lost in the late night traffic before the redhead could follow.

The detective gave up the chase, idled along at a mere 50 miles per hour in the middle lane, trying to figure out his next move. The witches' war had erupted into murder and, if it weren't quickly stopped, would almost certainly be the cause of further violent deaths. . . .

His first duty, of course, was to his client. Leaning forward, he pulled the dashboard phone from its rack, dialled operator and gave her the number of the Martinssen estate.

"Mike Shayne," he said to the

female voice that answered, "Are you okay, Medora?"

"Mike!" she cried. "I'm so glad you called. I thought you were. . ." A pause, then, "Where are you?"

"On the expressway," he told her. "Is everything okay?"

"Andrea's been murdered," she told him.

"I know," he replied.

"That bitch Brenda!" said Medora Martinssen. Then, "But how do you know?"

"I just saw her. How did you find out?"

"Juanita," said the tiny blonde. "She came here and told me. She's with me now. She thought they were going to kill her."

"Who?"

"Brenda — and that giant black girl of hers — Jeannette, I think."

"I'm on my way," he assured her.

"Get here as fast as you can, Mike. I'm frightened. Juan has disappeared."

Mike Shayne hung up and concentrated on his driving, putting his foot down hard on the accelerator and easing into the high-speed left lane.

Thanks to the lateness of the hour, he reached the Bal Harbour offramp in less than fifteen minutes, eased onto a nearly empty boulevard and began the approach to the Martinssen mansion via a series of curving roadways. Still unaware of the rules of the deadly game he was engaged in, the red-

head dimmed his headlights as he approached the gilt-tipped spear gateway of his client's house.

He was about to reach for the call-box affixed to the gatepost when something just inside it caused him to pause. Two small patches of white lay on the ground just inside the barrier.

Carefully, gun again in hand, he slide out of the Buick for a closer look through the iron spears. The patches of white belonged to the silent guard dogs, who lay on their sides on the grass alongside the driveway, motionless, apparently dead.

Shayne tugged at his left ear-lobe with his free hand, pondering the situation. If the enemy were already inside — as seemed evident — it would be wise to scout the situation before rushing into a possible trap.

He got back in the Buick, drove slowly along the bordering road, seeking some sort of rear entry. Fifty yards further along, there was a break in the link chain fence where a matching gate yawned open inward. The detective debated getting out of his car for further scouting on foot, decided against it. At least, the steel-bodied Buick offered him some protection. He turned and drove through it at moderate speed.

The car motor was barely audible as he feathered-toed the gas pedal and, turning off his dims, cautiously drove on inside. A tall hedge barrier blocked out all view

of the mansion itself.

The driveway, only one lane wide, rounded a gentle rise and then was blocked by another link chain gate. A break in the hedge to his left showed and it branched at right angles, the turnoff leading to the rear of the sparsely lighted mansion itself. The detective took time out to lock the Buick tightly after replacing the partly emptied clip of his Colt with a fresh one.

If anyone tried to drive out by the back way, his Buick effectively blocked it. . . .

No sounds drifted from the main house, approximately a hundred yards away across the carefully landscaped lawn and gardens whose blooms lay subdued by the darkness. Walking on the grass alongside the graveled surface to avoid making needless noise, Mike Shayne proceeded cautiously toward it.

To his left rose a converted coach house, now evidently a two-story garage. He considered taking a look inside, decided against it for now. His job was to get to his client's wife in condition to protect her. He thought again of the two Siberian huskies lying still within the main gate.

On his right, about halfway to the mansion, was a small stand of half-grown cypress. Shayne slid by it, his eyes on the big house, didn't hear the whisper of movement behind him until he was grabbed from behind in a grip so tight that it all but smothered him.

His arms were pinned to his side and his struggles to break out of the paralyzing grip were fruitless. He let himself relax, apparently giving in, then stamped backward, hard, with his right foot. There was a gasp of pain as it struck something soft, and momentarily the grip was relaxed.

He struggled free, lifted the gun in his right hand as he started to spin around — to have the hard edge of a hand chop down on his right wrist with nerve-numbing strength — a real karate chop. The Colt went spinning out of his hand to thud silently to the turf.

He shifted barely in time to avoid a knee to his groin, jabbed an elbow backward into his attacker's gut, heard the breath hiss from lips above his own, completed his spin and drove a high, hard left-fisted blow against the sharp side of a suddenly unguarded jaw.

His opponent went down on hands and knees and, for the first time, Mike got a good look. To his considerable surprise, his attacker was Jeannette, the gigantic Watu-si-sized black woman he had already met at Brenda's headquarters. On her hands and knees, she glared at him, the white of her eyes bright in the light from the big house.

"Mr. Shayne!" She gasped out the words, sounding surprised. "What are you doing here? I thought. . . ."

He didn't stop to be chivalrous, planted a well placed kick against the other side of her jaw that caused her to collapse, face down, on the clipped turf. He picked up his handgun, stood looking down at her, pondering his next move. His instinct was to tie her up — but what with? He stepped quickly to the garage doors, found a smaller door to one side that opened to his turn of the knob.

He dragged the limp, gigantic body inside the garage — no mean task even for a man with his strength. She must have weighed well over 200 pounds, none of it fat. Nor did the black burnoose-like robe encompassing her body help. He finally put her down, stripped it off, revealing a black leotard beneath that, in turn, revealed the magnificent contours of her black body.

After getting her within the garage, he dragged her still-limp frame to a rear corner, there tied her up effectively with strips torn from her black burnoose. As he left her there to proceed toward the mansion, he found himself troubled by something as familiar as it was elusive.

The scent . . . He had smelled it twice before in the last two nights. Once in Brenda's apartment, once in his own after being prodded abruptly from his recent nightmare.

For some reason, he felt a faint trace of guilt as he moved onward toward his client's big house . . .

VIII

MEDORA OPENED the door before he could sound the chimes, pulled him inside quickly with, "Thank God, you're here, Mike. I feel as though I were under siége."

He glanced around, said, "What about Juan? And the rest of the servants. In a house this large . . ."

"I gave them the weekend off," Medora brushed back a tendril of golden hair as she led him into the small off-living-room bar. "I don't know where Juan is. He disappeared hours ago. I feel as if I were under siege." And, again, "Thank God, you're here. I was so relieved when I got your call, I cried."

The rings under her eyes betrayed her perturbation as she slid behind the bar, "Everything's gone wrong."

"Everything?" he countered. "What does that mean?"

She looked up from the drinks she was mixing. "All I tried to do was help Andrea get started here in Miami. It meant so much to her. And now she's dead."

"Have you called the police?" the redhead asked.

She shook her head vehemently. "This is not a matter for the police." She pushed a glass of cognac and ice towrd him. "They don't understand. They'd put poor Juanita in prison."

"Did she kill Andrea?" Shayne asked.

"I don't know, Mike." This with a gesture of despair. "All I know is, she came here and told me Andrea was dead. She was almost incoherent."

"Where is she now?"

"Asleep. I had to give her a sedative. She's in no condition to — well, to do anything." Another pause, then, "No. I'm sure she couldn't have harmed her mistress. Andrea was like a mother to her." And, with hardening expression, "It was that bitch Brenda. She couldn't bear having a rival."

Mike Shayne said, "Medora, we've got to do something. I was jumped by Brenda's big black, Jeannette, on my way in here just now. I think you *are* under siege."

"You mean she's already here?" Medora gasped. "Oh, my God! Is there no escaping her? What did you do with Jeannette?"

"I locked her in the garage," said the detective. "And, incidentally, your dogs are out of action."

"I know." She nodded. "If they weren't, nobody would have got in here — not even you, Mike." A pause, then, "How much of the garage did you see?"

"Just the ground floor. Why?"

"Oh, nothing." Again Medora brushed back a stray tendril of golden hair. "I was just wondering if Brenda or somebody couldn't be upstairs in Juan's quarters."

"Aren't you worried about him?" the detective asked.

"Of course. First poor darling Knight, then Andrea, now Juan — maybe."

"And the dogs," Mike prodded. "Don't forget the dogs."

Shayne turned from the bar to reach for the phone.

"What are you doing?" she asked him.

But even so, the blow was enough to stagger the big ox, sending him a few feet backward, just as Medora's sharp little teeth bit into his gun wrist. He lifted his other knee hard against her tiny rump and sent her staggering forward to crash into the tonneau of the old Rolls Royce.

He swung like a cat then to face Juan, who had recovered and was once more moving to the attack. Shayne brought his Colt upward, found himself staring into the eye of the big black's revolver.

It was a stalemate.

Medora suddenly screamed and, for an instant, Juan's attention was diverted from the detective. It was for only a split second, but it was enough. The redhead slashed swiftly at his assailant's gun wrist with the heavy barrel of the Colt .45. Juan grunted as the heavy revolver clattered to the floor and then, with a savage snort, he lowered his head and charged.

The redhead was used to respect for the killing power of his own big automatic and in turn was briefly caught off guard. Juan's shoulder hit him full in the chest,

knocked him backward, and the towering human hulk came right on in after all.

Mike Shayne was pushed backward into the sedan in which he had locked Jeannette, but managed to pivot as he fell, thus enabling himself to bounce off the car at an angle, avoiding the full force of his foe's crushing onslaught. He sidestepped, staggering slightly, and Juan crashed head-on against the side of the car with sickening force, slowly subsiding to the floor.

A revolver shot sounded with deafening impact, and the redhead felt a slug tug at his left sleeve and thud into the sedan behind him. He waved and ducked, leaping laterally, to avoid further injury from the revolver, which Medora had picked up and was emptying wildly.

For a moment, the air inside the closed garage seemed full of ricochetting slugs, one of which whined within an inch of the detective's scalp. Then the hammer clicked on an empty cartridge and Mike Shayne was upon his client's wife, wresting the weapon from her tiny fingers and fending her off as she sought to scratch out his eyes.

"It's time for the police," he said firmly. "Otherwise we may all be killed."

"No, Mike — not yet." She was around the small bar, tugging at his arm. "At least let's see what's in the garage. If we stay together,

we won't be hurt."

He looked down at her, then let her pull him away, said, "Do you think it's wise to leave the house unguarded?"

"What can they do — if we're not in it?" she countered. "Come on. I want to make sure Jeannette is still tied up."

Shayne let himself be persuaded, albeit reluctantly. Once more unholstering the loaded Colt .45, he allowed his client's wife to lead him out of the mansion by a side door. The decor and furnishings they passed en route added to his impression of great opulence.

No alarms impeded their progress to the large garage. There, Shayne opened the door and led the way inside. Behind him Medora turned a wall switch, dimly lighting the interior.

It was large — at least forty by sixty feet. Along one wall lay gardening equipment — mowers, edgers, pruners, clippers and bags of mulch and fertilizer. The rest of the interior was sparsely populated by three automobiles — a stately old Rolls, up on blocks but varnished and polished to mirror-like brightness, a new station wagon with the legend *Martinssen Estates* on its sides in black-edged gilt letters. . . and the sedan in which the redhead had left the gigantic Jeannette.

The door yawned emptily at them, revealing the rear of the tonneau was empty.

Shayne muttered, "Son of a

bitch!" and again tugged at his left earlobe. He pulled his Colt upward to pivot, covering the entire garage lest somebody else be lurking there. It was empty.

"Are you sure you had her tied up securely?" Medora asked, a glint of fear reflected in her bright blue eyes.

"Not even Houdini's ghost could have got out of there without help," he assured her.

"Then where. . . ?" Medora began, halted abruptly and raised a nervous set of knuckles to her mouth. She grabbed the detective by the arm, tried to pull him toward the stairs to the rear, adding, "Come on Mike. There's no time. . . "

"It's all right, missie." The deep growl of the human pineapple cactus was heard, and the big black stepped out of a shadowed corner, his hand on the hilt of the big revolver holstered to the cartridge belt around his waist. "Everything's fixed like you wanted."

Mike Shayne noted the bandage around Juan's left forearm as he lifted his own gun. As he was already beginning to suspect, Juan was the man with whom he had duelled in the dead voodoo queen's bedroom. But Medora had seized his wrist with unexpected wiry strength backed by desperation, and he had no opportunity to aim and fire.

Juan moved in and the redhead was barely able to duck a hamlike

fist that smashed violently at his jaw. He managed to take the blow on his left shoulder and lunged with his hip. He caught Juan hard on the thigh and it felt as if he had used it to assault Fort Knox.

IX

"STOP IT!"

The voice was deep, commanding. Brenda — Marie Lascelles — stood on the small landing at the top of the stairs. She wore a beryl-green dress which matched her slanting eyes, and those eyes dominated the room as if she were a true empress instead of merely a queen of magic black and white.

All activity halted.

"Until this moment," Brenda went on, "obeah has taken care of its own affairs in Miami without troubling the authorities. True, our laws are not theirs, but we have managed to hold them within the legal limits. To do so is our only chance of survival, for we are too few to prevail openly, as we have always been."

There was silence as Brenda paused, broken by Medora's bitter, "That's all very well for you, Brenda — you have everything going your way. But what about those others — what about Andrea? You know what happened to her? You killed her."

A half-smile played across the established voodoo queen's wide sensual lips. She shook her head,

said, "On the contrary — you killed her, your own obeah tutor."

"You cannot prove that!" Medora's refutation sounded shrill in Shayne's ears.

"But I can — by eyewitness. Andrea's girl — Juanita — is my creature. She saw your man plant the knife, your man right here."

Juan suddenly came to life with a snarl and launched himself toward the staircase. A dark robed figure slipped out of the shadows beneath to intercept him, tripping him neatly and slamming him headfirst into the wall on his own momentum, causing him to slide to the floor, unconscious.

"You don't know what it's like to be poor, to have nothing," Medora cried.

"On the contrary, I was born much poorer than you," Brenda replied.

"But your family had never been rich — and lost everything. You never had to marry a man because he restored your family to riches."

"My ancestors lost estates far greater than yours." Brenda's voice was gentle rather than scornful, "and I relied on no man's help to restore my own."

"You green-eyed bitch!" Medora was all but foaming with fury.

Brenda lifted a finger to the towering Jeannette, who was standing silent beside the unconscious Juan. She said, "Take care of the lady."

Gracefully, Jeannette moved

forward, enveloped the raging blonde firmly, seeming to ignore her struggles. As she did so, her eyes met Shayne's, and she winked at him solidly. The red-head holstered his weapon and nodded.

Brenda said, "Take her to the house and put her to bed. See that she makes no more trouble. Come, Mr. Shayne, you and I have much to discuss."

She sat beside the detective in the Buick on the way back to her own quarters downtown, seemingly relaxed as she smoked one of his cigarettes. After a while, he said, "I have the damnest feeling of futility. I was never involved in a case where I could accomplish so little."

"On the contrary," Brenda said, "you have accomplished a great deal. In a very real way, your entry into this tragedy was like a catalyst that cleared the air of many impurities that might otherwise have remained and festered."

"I wish you'd tell me just how," the detective said.

"In the first place, when Knight Martinssen hired you, he was already a dead man — and it was you who saved him?"

"That damned doll?" he asked.

"Exactly. If you hadn't taken it to the police, its poison would probably not have been analyzed and a cure proscribed. So you saved your client's life."

He gestured it away with, "But

it was damned happenstantial."

"Then you were shrewd enough to come to me. I knew what Andrea was doing, of course — her girl was one of my creatures — and I considered her harmless. There was room for both of us here in Miami. But not with Medora Martinssen in the picture. It's a damned shame Andrea's grandmother taught her so much about our religion. Misused, it can be deadly dangerous — as you now know."

"I'm beginning to learn," the redhead replied.

"Medora Martinssen's bitterness is horrible," said Brenda, expressing more real emotion than the detective had heard from her before. She shuddered and not from the cool of the night. "It was she who caused you to drive to poor Andrea's home tonight. And she sent Juan after you to kill you, too, if necessary. I know he tried."

"How do you know?"

"That," she replied with a trace of mockery, "is for you to find out — if you can." Then, relenting, "Juanita was watching."

"But Medora said . . ." Shayne hesitated, added, "She lied?"

"Of course. The child is safe at my establishment. You may see her if you like."

"I believe you." The redhead meant it and his sincerity showed it his voice. Brenda flashed him a smile, half in mockery, half in appreciation. They pulled up in

front of her combination home and place of business. Brenda pointed out a driveway ramping downward just beyond, suggested he park his car in her garage.

When they were upstairs, over drinks, they continued their conversation. Mike Shayne said, "There are a few things I'm still in the dark about. Do you mind?"

"Fire," she said. "Fire away." Her slanted green eyes smiled at him coolly.

"For one thing," he said, "How do you know so damn much of what is going on? Don't tell me it's through magic."

She laughed warmly, shook her bronze-topped head, said, "Of course not. It's simply information. You see, I have my people scattered on all layers of society here. They tell me whatever they find out that may have bearing on our business. Poor Andrea's girl, for instance, got her job through my agency."

"What will happen to Medora?" he put it bluntly. "After all, she did kill her own teacher, or had her killed."

"Medora"—Brenda spoke slowly, thoughtfully—"is on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Even if the police manage to tie her in to Andrea's death, they will never be able to bring her to trial."

"I see." The redhead nodded. "What about Juan?"

"Out of Medora's control, he will be harmless. I shall probably

get him a job somewhere in the islands."

Mike Shayne found this more difficult to accept. Brenda sensed his distrust, said, "Animals like Juan kill and get killed, almost like fruit flies or drug addicts. As long as he is out of your friend Will Gentry's jurisdiction, it shouldn't bother you. After all, he tried to kill you—twice, wasn't it?"

Shayne nodded.

"Medora wanted you dead. She was afraid of your learning too much. She tried again, tonight, in the garage. Luckily, thanks to Andrea's girl, we were there beforehand. But you handle yourself well, Mike Shayne."

Brenda's eyes narrowed as she touched his arm with a gentle forefinger. He felt his pulses spring, held them in check for the moment, said "And my client—Knight Martinssen? He'll be okay?"

"He'll be fine — once he gets over the fact his wife is lost. He has a big business to run, big responsibilities. Ultimately, there will be someone else for him, of course, though he may not believe it for some time. You have done him a great service."

"No more than you," he told her, taking her hand in his. "Now, tell me two more things."

"Of course," she murmured.

"For one thing—I had a nightmare earlier this morning."

"I know," she told him. "Medora drugged your drink

to render you receptive."

"Son of a bitch!" he said. "You know it was directed against you?"

"I thought it seemed probable. When I found out, I sent Jeannette to your assistance. Were you aware of it?"

He nodded. "Her perfume lingered—and her laugh."

"You'll like her," Brenda promised. "She's full of humor."

"And muscles," Shayne added.

"She likes you," Brenda told him. "She says you're the first man who ever got the better of her."

"Brenda, you're clowning," said Shayne.

"Of course, the white witch replied. "I have a sense of humor too."

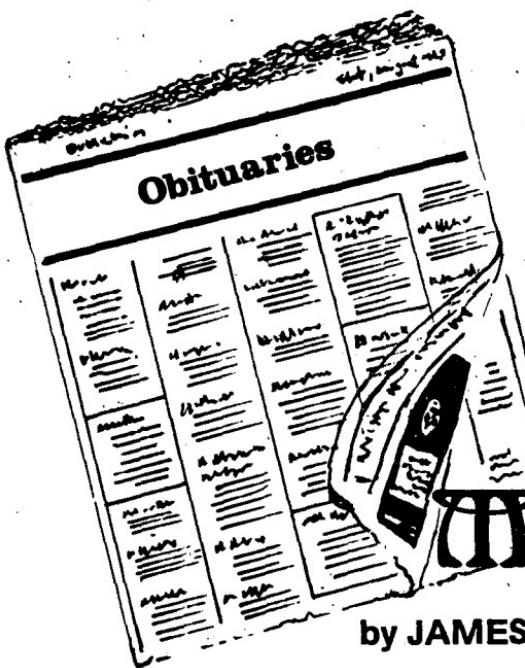
"And you wish me to stay with you—for what's left of the night," he told her.

The green eyes sparkled. "You see? You can do witchcraft too!"

"It's hardly obeah," he assured her. "You've been flashing signs ever since we got here."

"Oh dear!" She sighed. "And I thought I was being so subtle." She added, "Just for a night, we need each other. And I know your girl is in Tampa."

"I know better than to ask how you know that," Shayne told her, smiling. He studied her, then smiled, pulled her close, said before he kissed her, "The answer is yes . . ."



Man in the Morgue

by JAMES M. REASONER

When Calvin Masters Died, There Was No Reason to Suspect Foul Play. But Gary Was Sick of Writing Obits for a Living and Decided It Was a Way Out.

IT WAS BOUND to happen eventually. I had always suspected that it was only a matter of time until I began to crack up. I mean, there I was, a perfectly healthy young man, spending my days in a dank, dusty basement, surrounded by mouldering newspapers, trying to think up new ways to say somebody died.

I had been the Greenville

Banner's obit man for a little over a month. In addition to my daily phone calls to Greenville Memorial Hospital and to the various nursing homes to see who had died, I also was expected to keep an up-to-date file on Greenville's most prominent citizens, just in case of a sudden tragedy. It may sound melodramatic, but death was my business.

Besides that, because of a space shortage, I had to do my work in the newspaper morgue. Now that is a ghastly word. When people asked me what I did for a living, I would sometimes say cheerily, "Oh, I sit in a morgue and write about dead people."

So, considering the circumstances, you can see why I figured the old mind would go someday. But I hadn't counted on it happening so soon.

I sat at my old scarred desk in between stacks of ancient papers and looked at the words I had just jotted down on my notepad. An unshaded light bulb hung over the desk and gave off a harsh glare, but it didn't obscure the words.

There was only one thing to do. Whether I was losing my mind or whether I really had something, I had to tell Jason about it. I trooped up the stairs to the city room.

Jason Chambers was at his desk, typing his usual mile a minute. As editor and chief reporter, he wrote over half the *Banner's* copy. I had never known a busier person, but it seemed to suit him. He said all the activity kept him young. I don't know about that, but he didn't look anywhere near his forty-five years.

"Say, Jason," I said, "could I bother you for a second?"

He didn't look up or even quit typing as he replied, "Sure, Gary. What's up?"

"I wish you'd take a look at this."

I handed him my notepad. He scanned it quickly and then gave it back to me. "So? It's just another obit for you to write."

"Did you notice the address of the deceased?"

"I think it said the Paragon Hotel. Is that so unusual? That place is a dive, a wino's paradise."

"Yeah, but it's not unusual for someone to die there. In fact, it's been downright common lately. This is the fourth one this month."

Jason leaned back in his chair. "What are you trying to say, Gary? That someone is knocking off winos? What possible motive could anyone have?"

"Well . . ." I was beginning to feel stupid. After all, Jason was right. Rummies kick off all the time, their systems éaten up by the booze. Four in one month at the same flophouse was not pushing the laws of chance at all.

"You're right. I just thought I had something for a minute. You know what you always say—'Scoops don't walk up and hit you in the face; you have to go chase 'em down.'"

He laughed. "Spoken like a true newspaperman. You'll find that big story one of these days, Gary. Now, why don't you go write that obituary up and we'll get it in tomorrow's paper."

But when I got back in the basement, I didn't write up the obit. I got my files out and did some

checking, to refresh the facts in my mind.

Barton Gilmore died on the third of the month. He was 49 years old at the time of his death. A disabled veteran with no living relatives, the Paragon Hotel was his only known address. The hotel manager had found the body and called an ambulance, but Gilmore was dead on the scene. Cause of death, heart attack.

On the eleventh, Frank Bannister met his end in much the same way. He was 54, a widower, with a married daughter somewhere in the Midwest.

Six days later, on the seventeenth, Benjamin Logan, 50, went to meet his Maker. Point of departure — the Paragon Hotel. And on the twenty-fifth day of the month, Calvin Masters had checked out for good late in the evening. My morning call to the hospital had told me that.

Masters had been 55. Like the others, he had had no close relatives. All four men were alcoholics, living from one drink to the next, marking time in the Paragon Hotel. They had all died of natural causes. It was sad, but as Jason said, it happened all the time.

Then why was I so bugged by it? I pulled out the files of old Clyde Winters, who had the job before me, and looked through the obits for the last few months, keeping an eye out for mention of the Paragon or any other skid row hotel.

I went back four months. There were quite a few wino deaths, but when I got them all sorted out, I could see that the Paragon averaged just over three such deaths a month, while the other flophouses rarely had over two. I found myself getting convinced again that something strange was going on.

I put all my figures down neatly and went back upstairs. When Jason saw me coming, he said, "Got that obit typed up?"

"Uh — no — but I've been doing some research. Look at this, Jason."

He glanced at it and said, "I wish you'd give it up, Gary. We've got better things to do around here than hatch wild schemes."

"But I thought you'd like to know. This could be a big story."

Jason never got mad, but sometimes his eyes went steely and his voice hardened. This was one of those times. "A newspaper deals in facts, Gary, not speculation. Our duty is to report this death, not to comment on it. And any investigation of it will be done by the police. Okay?"

Properly chastised, I nodded my head and went back to my morgue, thinking glumly, *Woodward and Bernstein, where are you when I need you?*

The Paragon Hotel deaths stayed in my thoughts all day. I tried to do my usual work and keep my mind occupied, but it just didn't work. By late afternoon, I

knew I had to keep digging at it, no matter what Jason said.

When I got off at five-thirty, I waved at Jason and went quickly to my old jalopy. There was a growling in my stomach that told me to go home and eat supper, but there was a similar, more insistant growling in my head. I pointed the car toward the Paragon Hotel.

The place was a dump, all right. Three stories of what had once been red brick before time faded it to the color of mud, sandwiched between a cluttered pawn shop and a bar and grill. The neighborhood was almost as depressing as my morgue.

I was lucky and found a place to park in front of the hotel, behind a Lincoln Continental. As I got out, a ragged man stumbled past on the sidewalk. I was glad he didn't put the touch on me. I didn't want to support his habit.

Paint was peeling off the Paragon's front doors in wide strips. Inside, the lobby was dim and odorous. I didn't even want to guess at all the sources of the smell.

The desk was on the left. When I got closer, I could see a man leaning back in a chair, his feet propped up against the wall. He was a middle-aged man with a big belly and just a fringe of white hair left. Soft snores issued from his gaping mouth.

This was not the kind of place that inspired confidence in me, but I told myself that a journalist has

to be brave and slapped the counter sharply, saying, "Hey!"

The man's feet came down with a thud and he sat up, shaking his head and making groggy noises. When his bleary eyes finally cleared enough for him to notice me, he scratched his stomach and said, "How do, young fella. Somethin' I can help you with?"

I pulled my wallet out and held up my press card, making sure he saw the five-dollar bill I held up with it. "I'm Gary Jenson from the Greenville *Banner*. I'd like to ask you a few questions if you don't mind."

He rubbed a hand along his stubbled jaw. "You think I could maybe see that ID card again, a little closer this time?"

"Sure." I gave it to him and he handed it right back, minus the five.

"Looks straight enough. Ask your questions."

"Yesterday a man named Calvin Masters died here."

"Yep. Ol' Calvin finally got too much hooch."

"I believe you found the body? You *are* Ralph Gunderson, the manager?"

"That's me. I found him, all right. Stretched out on the bed like he just give out and couldn't take it anymore."

"How did you come to find him?" Gunderson belched before he answered, wafting stale beer fumes in my direction. "Rent's due and payable every night, in

advance. I go around and collect it. Calvin didn't answer when I knocked, so I let myself in with my passkey."

"That's how you found the other men who have died here recently?"

"Yep." He looked mournful. "All the old regulars are goin'. Won't be long till none of us is left."

"You knew all of these men well?"

"They've been here a long time. They didn't have anyplace else to go."

"Would you say that there was anything unusual about them?"

"Like what? They was just old winos. Say, why are you so interested, buddy? Nobody else came around asking questions when somebody kicked off."

"Well," I said, "I just thought there might be a good human interest story in it, you know, fallen angels of Skid Row, that sort of thing."

"That sort of crap, you mean. Take it from me . . . what was your name again?"

"Jenson, Gary Jenson."

"Well, take it from me, Jenson, there ain't no story here. Nothin' here but us old bums."

I almost believed him. Despair was so thick in the air that I could hardly breathe. Dying would be easier than living, in a place like this. But something I couldn't identify was still nagging at the back of my mind.

I didn't think that I could get anything worthwhile out of Gunderson, so I thanked him and went back outside. Dusk had settled down, putting a soft blur on the grim surroundings. I didn't mind a bit. I wanted to get home and take a deep breath of air with some hope in it.

Two days dragged by. I did my work with only half my mind, using the other half to try to pin down the elusive thing that bothered me about my visit to the Paragon Hotel. Nothing clicked, though, and I was just about ready to give it up.

I was leaning a hip on the corner of Jason's desk and shooting the breeze with him when Al Fandera, our crack news photographer, came out of the darkroom and laid some still-wet prints down on the desk beside me. "You want any of these for the front page?" he asked Jason.

As Jason looked them over, I glanced idly at them. It was the usual stuff: a wrecked car, a grass fire, a big fish caught by some kid, the dedication of a new wing on the hospital . . .

My eyes jumped back to that last picture. It was a standard shot of smiling dignitaries grouped around the cornerstone of the new wing. At the very edge of the picture, a slice of the parking lot was visible. The depth of field was beginning to fuzz up a little bit, but I could easily make out

the fancy cars, the Cadillacs, the Mercedes, the Lincolns. Suddenly, I knew what had been trying to escape from my subconscious for the past two days.

What was a Lincoln Continental doing parked in front of a rattrap like the Paragon Hotel? Especially a Lincoln Continental with M.D. plates? I could see it now, plain as day in my memory. The incongruity had registered on my brain then. It had just taken its own sweet time crawling back out again.

I had opened my mouth to say something about it when I remembered Jason's hard-nosed attitude about my earlier suspicions. Maybe I was afraid of being chewed out again. Maybe I wanted to prove that I was a good investigative reporter after all. Whatever it was, I decided to keep quiet until I had more to go on.

I went back down to the morgue and tried to figure out what a rich doctor could be doing in such a crummy neighborhood. Making a house call? No way!

Although I tried, I just couldn't remember the numbers on the Lincoln's license plates. All I remembered was that they were M.D. tags. So I didn't even have any way to find out who the guy was, unless I ran across the car again.

And then I thought, what better place to find the car than the place where I found it before?

When five-thirty rolled around,

I headed for the Paragon Hotel. This time, however, there was no Lincoln Continental parked in front. I cruised up and down the streets for blocks around, but I didn't spot it anywhere. This dampened my enthusiasm considerably. I wasn't going to let it stop me, though.

It took a week of surveillance, but finally, as I drove by the hotel one evening at twilight, I saw the Lincoln, parked in front of the hotel where it had been before. I recognized the big cream-colored job right away. It took a brave man to leave it parked in this scruffy place.

I found a parking place on a side street a block over, where I could watch the car unobtrusively. As I sat there and it got darker, several hard-looking characters walked by. My nerves were beginning to get ragged, and I was very relieved when a man came out of the Paragon, got into the Lincoln, and started it up. I pulled out after him, trying not to follow too closely.

We went back across the business district and then began to climb into the hills where Greenville's upper crust lived. It figured that that's where a rich doctor would have his home. It was fully dark now, and I had no trouble following the big car's taillights.

The Lincoln turned left off the winding road and pulled into a private drive. I slowed down when I got there. A few lights were

visible from the house concealed behind the high hedge. My headlights picked up a fancy mailbox, and I recognized the name on it — *Dr. Leonard Felton*.

As I said, part of my job is to keep and up-to-date file on the town's leading citizens, of which Dr. Leonard Felton was definitely one. I recalled the picture we had of him — very clean-cut, a little gray at the temple, a stern but friendly expression. The All-American father figure.

He lived up to the image, too. He was a civic leader, a member of the school board, as well as an outstanding surgeon. Besides which, he was one of the richest men in town. All in all, hardly the type you'd expect to find at the Paragon Hotel.

I went back to my apartment and spent the better part of the night trying to puzzle out a connection between Dr. Felton and a bunch of dead winos. All I got out of it was a tough time getting up and going to work the next morning.

What with my frequent calls to the hospital, I had gotten to know the public information officer, Tom Reid, fairly well. The next time I called, I asked him, "Say, Tom, could you send me over some information on Dr. Felton for me?"

"What do you need it for, Gary?"

"Well, you know I'm trying to break out of this job and into reporting, and I thought if I could

come up with a good feature story on some important person, it might just be the break I need."

Tom was a nice guy who liked to cooperate when he could. He replied, "Sure, I'll put something together. Background, duties at the hospital, special surgeries performed, that sort of thing?"

"That'd be great." I didn't know what I was looking for, so I didn't know what might be important.

"All right, I'll have someone bring it over to the paper this afternoon."

"Thanks, Tom."

He was true to his word, and a messenger brought me a thick manila envelope about three o'clock. I pulled the sheaf of papers out and began to read through them eagerly.

When I finished, I still didn't see any link between Felton, the Paragon, and the dead men. He was evidently a whiz of a doctor, a widely respected surgeon who kept up on all the latest discoveries and techniques. Tom had included a list of all the major operations he had performed, and it was a long one. But his presence at the Paragon was still strange enough to intrigue me.

More digging into Felton's background produced nothing except people who sang the man's praises. To hear them tell it, he didn't have an enemy in the world. No one could connect him in any

way with the Paragon Hotel.

It was frustrating, but there it was. I had a tantalizing fact that led me straight to a dead end. *Well, I told myself, you'll just have to see if you can find another road.*

The next day, on my lunch hour, I drove over to the Paragon's neighborhood. I parked the car and watched the front of the place. After a quarter of an hour or so, an old man came out of the hotel and went over to the bar and grill. He looked like just the type I wanted to talk to.

Rundown bars are not my favorite places. I could feel a fluttering in the pit of my stomach as I entered the place. It was dark inside, even at midday, and the smell of stale beer was almost overpowering.

The old man I had seen outside was perched on a barstool, nursing a beer. I slid onto the stool beside him and said to the burly bartender, "Beer, please." When he brought it, it was warm and flat.

As I sipped on the bad beer, I turned to the old man and said, "Nice day, don't you think?"

"I wouldn't know," he answered. "I don't pay much attention to the weather anymore."

"You live next door in the Paragon, don't you?"

"If you can call it living." His gnarled hand shook a little as he lifted the mug to his lips and drained it.

"Next one's on me."

He looked over at me with suspicion. "You must want something, boy. You don't look like a cop. Just what is it you do want?"

I decided a little honesty might be the best policy. "I'm a newspaper reporter. I'm doing a story about life down here on Skid Row. I thought the Paragon would be a good place to start."

"Well, I know all about the Paragon. Lived there for twenty years."

"Is that right? I guess you know all the regular occupants there, then. I've already talked to Mr. Gunderson. He said that a lot of the long-time residents have died recently."

"Yeah, I'm one of the last ones left. I knew all those boys, shared many a drink with them. 'Cept old Clancy, of course. He never drank. Only one of the whole bunch with a good liver and kidneys, I suppose."

The name Clancy rang a faint bell. He had been one of the Paragon deaths a month or so earlier.

I said, "That sounds interesting — about Clancy not drinking, I mean. Was there anything unusual about the other men? That's just the sort of thing I'm

looking for."

"Well . . ." The old man paused and smacked his lips thirstily, and I signalled for the bartender to bring another beer. After a long swallow, the old man continued.

Don't know of anything partic-

ularly *special* about any of the boys. Charlie Falcone claims he met John Wayne once. Jim Garrett had real good eyes. Of course, he hadn't been boozing as long as the rest of us. Frank Bannister had good eyesight, too. That's unusual. He was a marksman in the army, you know."

I wasn't interested in John Wayne or good eyesight or anything else the old man said as he rambled on, anxious for company like any other man. It looked like I had drawn a blank here, too.

Then he said something that made my ears prick up and my heart jump. "You want a good story, you should do one on Doc Felton."

I kept my voice noncommittal and said, "You mean Dr. Leonard Felton?"

"Yeah, he comes down once a week to check on us, see that we don't get in too bad a shape. Says it's his duty."

"Sounds nice of him."

"Oh, yeah, he's a good man. Course, it's the least he could do, seeing as how he owns the place."

This time I couldn't keep the surprise out of my voice. "He owns the Paragon?"

"Yeah. At least he gives Gunderson orders like he does. And Gunderson gives him the rent money."

"Does everyone know about this?"

"Well, no and I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't go blabbing around that I told you, either. I can't help what I overhear accidental-like."

"Don't worry," I assured him. "Newspapermen always protect their sources." I stood up and put a five-dollar bill down on the bar in front of him. "You've been quite a help. Thank you."

The bill disappeared deftly and he said, "Glad to be of service, son."

My lunch hour was up and I hadn't gotten anything to eat, but I had plenty to chew on. I had the connection between Felton and the Paragon. What I didn't have was anything tying him in with the deaths. I began mentally replaying everything the old man had told me.

I had just parked my car at the *Banner* when two pieces of the puzzle suddenly fit together. Then another piece connected with them, then another and another until I could make out a picture. There were still some holes in it, but I could make out a picture. There were still some holes in it, but I could tell what it was now.

I ran into the building and down into the basement. The file on Dr. Felton that Tom Reid had prepared was still sitting on my desk. I grabbed it up and leafed through it until I found the sheet I wanted. Then I pulled out the notes I had made a week earlier on the wino.

deaths and put the two together. They matched in enough places to convince me that my theory was a good one.

I jammed a sheet of paper into the typewriter and began banging away. I had a story that would put me at the top of the heap. This could even lead to a job with the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times*!

The sudden realization that I had no concrete proof threw cold water all over my excitement. I stared at the words I had written and knew that they were all guess-work and deduction. I had to have more. A visit to Dr. Leonard Felton was in order.

Jason was out somewhere, covering a story, so I didn't have to worry about explaining to him why I was leaving again. I hustled over to the medical building where Felton had his offices.

The place had dark paneling on the walls, thick carpet, piped-in music, and a frosty receptionist who told me that yes, Dr. Felton was in, but he couldn't possibly see me unless I had an appointment. I said, "Look, you can at least ask him if he'll see me, can't you?"

"I'm sorry, sir, he'll be tied up all afternoon."

"But it's vitally important."

She smiled slightly. "A matter of life and death, I suppose?"

I was getting a little upset. "You're darn right it is! A matter

of several deaths, in fact!" I raised my voice even louder. "And what about the *Paragon Hotel*?" I shouted.

That had the desired effect. The broad door to one side of the receptionist's desk popped open seconds after I said it. A wide-eyed man whom I recognized as Felton stuck his head out and looked scared.

Then he recovered his composure and said, "What's all this commotion about, Miss Davis?"

"This man insists he has to see you, but I told him —"

I cut in. "Jenson, of the *Banner*, Dr. Felton. I'd like to ask you a few questions about —"

"Yes, yes, I heard." He didn't want want me saying it again. "Come in, Mr. Jenson, come in."

I followed him into his luxurious office, refused his offer of a chair, and watched as he sat down and lit a cigarette with a shaky hand. "Now," he said, "what's this all about?"

"You own the *Paragon Hotel*."

"You own the *Paragon Hotel*." It was a flat statement.

He tried to look bewildered. "The *Paragon Hotel*? I've never heard of it, and I certainly don't own it."

"Come off it, doctor. I have information saying that you *do* own it, and I've seen you there myself, twice. I'm sure that with enough digging around, I can turn up conclusive proof. It would make a good headline, don't you think?"

Prominent physician revealed as slumlord?"

He didn't even notice the ashes that fell on the carpet from his cigarette. "All right. What do you want? Money?"

I felt like cheering. The hard part, breaking him down, was over. "No money. Just the answers to some questions."

"Go ahead."

"You do own the Paragon?"

"Possibly. I don't think you can prove it, however."

"You won't have to worry about that if you just give me honest answers. Ralph Gunderson runs the Paragon for you."

"He's the manager, yes."

"And you go down there every week to check on the rummies?"

"I like to do some charity work."

I thought some acid comments about easing one's conscience, but I kept them to myself. "Do you ever talk to Gunderson about your other cases, your hospital work?"

He looked honestly baffled by that one. "I suppose so — just the kind of idle chit-chat one makes with a business acquaintance."

"I think I've got these dates right, but you can correct me if I'm wrong. On the thirteenth of this month, you did a cornea transplant on a little girl, right? Transplants seem to be your speciality."

"I've done a good deal of work in the field, but I don't see —"

"Last month, on the seventh and tenth, you did kidney transplants. The month before, you did two more cornea jobs. In each case, the donor requested anonymity. Why is that, doctor?"

"Many donors request that. It's just — standard practice."

"It strikes me as strange that just before each of these operations, a man died at the Paragon Hotel, a man who happened to have the necessary organ in good enough shape to transplant. All you had to do was mention to Gunderson what you needed, and he supplied it."

The skin on Felton's face had drawn back into a tight mask.

"No!" he cried. "It wasn't the way you think. It was just coincidence. Gunderson knew that the hospital was looking for a donor, and when the man died, there was no one else to claim the body. It worked out well for everyone."

"And then the coincidences kept happening. I suppose Gunderson got a fee each time?"

"It seemed only fair to give him something. But I swear it was coincidental, all of it." The thing he said next in a low voice told me that not even he believed that. "Besides, they weren't any good to anybody the way they were, not even themselves."

"Only to Gunderson."

I left him staring at the wall. My knees were shaking as I walked out. My tough-guy act had been a hard one to put on, but the

bluff had worked and I knew the whole story. Now there was only one more place I had to go.

I don't know why I felt like I had to go back to the Paragon. Maybe it was because, for the first time in my brief career in journalism, I had my teeth sunk into a big story and didn't want to let go. I guess the story had as strong a grip on me as I had on it.

At any rate, I drove over to the hotel. Several derelicts were sitting on its front steps, clutching their brown paper bags. They gave me idly curious looks as I brushed past them and went in.

Gunderson was nowhere to be seen. The entire lobby was deserted. I slipped behind the desk and opened the door leading into the back. It led into a small kitchen and bedroom, which were also empty.

That meant Gunderson must be in one of the rooms. I went back into the lobby and moved slowly and quietly up the stairs. There were no sounds coming from above, and the silence made the grim old place pretty spooky.

I listened at all the doors on the second floor and didn't hear anything but scattered snores. I was at the first door on the third floor when a door further down the hall opened and Gunderson stepped out.

He stopped short when he saw me and hastily closed the door behind him. I moved toward him and spoke quickly. "Hello, Mr.

Gunderson. I was just looking for you. I'd like to ask you some more questions."

He kept his feet planted firmly on the floor and said, "Don't have time now. You'll have to come back later."

"This won't take long. I've just come from Dr. Felton's office."

He squinted at me. "Who?"

"Dr. Leonard Felton. Your boss."

"Never heard of him. You'd better get out of here now."

"You seem sort of nervous. What's in that room?"

"Nah, I ain't nervous, just busy. Gotta get this room cleaned up, that's all."

"I'll just bet you do. This place hasn't been cleaned since Horace Greeley was a copy boy."

His nervous squint was replaced by an angry one. I began to wonder if coming here was such a good idea. He snapped, "I told you to get out of here, and I meant it. You ain't got no business here!"

Well, he wasn't going to budge, so if I couldn't go through him, I'd go around him. I took a quick step one way and when he moved to stop me, jumped the other way. My shoulder hit the door and popped it open.

I caught a quick glimpse of a body sprawled on the bed inside before hands clamped down on my shoulders and spun me away down the hall. My back slammed into the wall next to the window

at the end of the hall, knocking the breath out of me.

Gunderson's figure loomed up in front of me. I hadn't realized how powerful he was. I gulped some air down and said, "You were about to report another death from natural causes, weren't you? How did you help this one along? A knock on the head? Some pills? I know all about your arrangement with Felton."

He grinned, and it wasn't pleasant to look at. "I always thought Felton was a sissy. He never wanted to hear any of the details. Shoot, all it usually took was a bump on the noggin. They'd a croaked sooner or later anyway. I just sorta helped 'em along every once in a while."

"And since they were winos, bums, human trash, no one ever thought to look closely. No one ever ordered an autopsy. They just assumed natural causes and that was that."

The whole business sickened me, but at the moment, I was more worried about getting out of the Paragon Hotel alive.

"Yeah," Gunderson chuckled. "Them doctors are dumb, all right. It'll be harder with your body, but I'll think of something."

The big arms made a circle and started to close in on me. I saw movement at the far end of the hall, yelled, and tried to slide under Gunderson's grip. The rough hands grabbed me and locked on my throat.

Then something barreled into us and we all wound up on the floor. There was a lot of grunting and yelling, and then I rolled free of the tangle. A strong hand took my arm and helped me to my feet.

"You all right, kid?" Jason Chambers asked.

I looked down at the three cops holding Gunderson down. "How — how did you know?" was all I could manage to say.

"When I got back to the paper, I went down to the morgue to see you and found the story in your typewriter. Since you hadn't finished it, I figured you might be out trying to prove the whole business. You had already been to Felton's office when I checked there, so I thought I'd better call the cops and come over here. We got here in time to hear Gunderson admit his part in it. Looks like you were right all along, Gary."

The cops handcuffed Gunderson and led him away. I asked Jason, "Do you think maybe I could write the story, Jason? I mean, since I tracked it down and everything?"

He slapped me on the back. "Sure, Gary. By-line and everything. But you'd better get back to the morgue right now. You've got an obit to write."

"An obit? Whose?"

"It seems that one of Greenville's leading residents committed suicide earlier this afternoon. Dr. Leonard Felton."

The Boy



in the Casket

by JIM DAWSON

The Body Was Small, It Was Long Buried,
Its Exposure Was a Fluke. But Oxendine
Was Being Paid To Get a Story.

I HAD SENT OFF my story about the clairvoyant who recently ghostwrote Charles Dickens' lastest novel and had settled into a lumpy bed at the Majestic Motel on the edge of Pittsburgh, when the phone screamed at me. I picked it up.

"Oxendine? LaSalle!" snapped the voice in my hand.

"Hello, LaSalle," I answered him.

"You finished with our Victor-

ian novelist?"

"It'll be on your desk tomorrow afternoon," I said.

"Great, beautiful! Got something new for ya."

I moaned for his benefit. There went my noon wake-up. "Another fluff piece? Or something really newsworthy, like John Travolta's horoscope?"

"Well," he told me, "It's not *that* important, Oxendine. You're gonna have to get a few more

years experience before we turn ya loose on horoscopes. How about a grave opening?"

"Is grave a noun or adjective?"

"Try noun. Plural is graveyard."

"Let's hear it," I said, studying the cracks in the ceiling.

LaSalle shuffled papers and slurped at the coffee that always sat near his elbow. "You're about an hour north of the West Virginia state line. Take I-79 down to Morgantown, just south of the border."

I sang, "Down Mexico way."

"Look," he grumbled, "if ya wanna sing and dance I'll hang up and call collect. Now, ya get to this Morgantown and go see a Marmaduke Dent at the *Dominion Post*."

"Marmaduke? This another dog story?"

"He's a reporter. You might also talk to the caretaker at —" LaSalle crackled through his notes — "Riverview Cemetery. You'll need some local color. And get it thirtied by tomorrow night."

Yeh, I thought, *then you or some other clown at the Big Desk can send me off to report on another freak show, as seen from another crummy motel.* I was beginning to feel as harmless as a poker chip. But I shoved my self-pity aside for the moment and asked him, "What happened?"

"Guy says a grave opened up and a coffin popped out," he growled as pleasantly as he could.

"Sounds like another close

encounters tale," I said.

"Yeh? And this should sound like goodbye." The phone clicked dead on LaSalle's end. I work for such wonderful folks.

The next morning I pulled into Morgantown from the Interstate. A service station attendant sold me a 50¢ map of the town, pointed his finger thataway, and sent me hunting for the *Dominion Post* Building on the other side of town.

In the paper's small city room I showed my card to the first reporter who noticed me, a young girl wearing her hair in frosty, frothy swirls like Farrah. "American *Inquirer*?" she asked me, as if the name meant nothing to her.

"Is Marmaduke around?" I figured the last name was superfluous.

She pointed her ballpoint at a thin, blurred man scurrying around the back of the room. "Check with Mr. Core."

There were several men who looked as if they might be Marmadukes, but I decided my best bet was to talk to Mr. Core first. He was obviously the editor. However, he was to harried to care who I was.

"Dent hasn't come in yet," he said, barrelling past me, leaving a wake of cigar stink. "If he doesn't walk through that door any minute now, he'll be back writing obituaries tomorrow." Without interrupting the flow of his conversation, he started

growling at someone else. I picked up a copy of the morning paper from his desk and carried it outside to my car.

A four-column-wide photo took up half of the lower front page, showing two men leaning on their shovels in a cemetery. Beneath it in small letters was, *Photo by M. Dent.* The story took up the only column to the right of it.

GRAVE OPENS MYSTERIOUSLY

by Duke Dent

Staff Writer

An unmarked grave was found open early this morning at Riverview Cemetery here in Morgantown. Caretaker Okie Scritchfield, who discovered the phenomenon at daybreak, said he immediately called the police. Patrolman John Neubauer was dispatched to the scene for an investigation and to supervise the removal of the broken vault, which was taken from the grave in seven pieces. According to Neubauer there was apparently no vandalism involved. Benn Vault Company laid a new vault into the grave at 11 o'clock, and the casket — belonging to a small child — was reinterred before noon.

Funeral director J. Robert (Bob) Godeau, of Godeau Memorial Chapel, guessed

that gases had probably built up within the vault and forced the grave open.

The Weather Bureau reported no lightning activity in the area last night, and a spokesman for the Hope Gas Co. reported that there was no gas around the grave, which is located near a Dorsey Avenue gas main. An expert at the Morgantown Landslide Commission hinted that a geologic disturbance may be involved but did not elaborate until further tests are made.

No other reason was given, except for Mr. Scritchfield's explanation that "God had a hand in this."

The child's identity is as yet unknown.

I found Riverview on my little map and snaked through Morgantown's hilly streets to get there. It was an old cemetery located on a long, slanting hill that would have given an excellent view of the industrial-green Monongahela River if anyone had the inclination to gaze upon it.

The cemetery had a quiet charm that's hard to find in the memorial parks and marble orchards of larger cities. A shabby little clapboard house sat just inside the sandstone gate, surrounded by hedges. I parked in front of it and waded through the potted

plants on the porch to get to the door.

A perky old head looked through the rusty screen. "Can I help ya, sir?" she said, whistling her ess.

"I'm looking for Mr. Scritchfield."

"Might I ask why?"

When I told her I was a reporter from the American *Inquirer*, she flung the door open. Without the screen between us, she looked as rugged as a caretaker herself. "The American *Inquirer*? She snatched a copy off a table near the door and proudly displayed it for me. "Read it ever' week, yessir. What's yer name and I'll look ya up."

"Oxendine, m'am."

She tried to flash a smile but there wasn't anything to flash. If a tooth was hiding inside her head, I would have had to stick a finger in to find it, and that, frankly, would be taking the role of probing journalist a bit too far.

"Yessir, I know yer stuff," she whistled. "You wrote that article 'bout Farrah Fawcett-Major's roots a few months back."

I took the blame.

"And didn't you write that one there 'bout the farmer had a heart attack in his chickencoop and his chickens picked his bones clean by the time his folks found 'em?"

I confessed to that one too, lamenting that the poor farmer hadn't fared well in their pecking order.

"Tell me more 'bout that one,"

she asked me, widening her tired, baggy eyes.

I looked past her into the dim room, trying to sort the clutter. Someone had stuffed the room with carnival bric-a-brac: gypsy lamps, gaudy statuettes of Jesus, several day-glow religious paintings on dark felt. What looked to be a stuffed animal inside a cloudy cellophane bag sat in one of two wicker rockers. The room also had an unpleasant musty odor that I figured Scritchfield had dragged in from the graves. But there was no sign of the caretaker himself.

"M'am, I'm looking for Okie Scritchfield."

"Well he ain't here."

"Could you tell me where he is?"

She nodded past me and smacked her gums. "Out there someplace. I can't hear the mower goin' but he's putterin' around. The place ain't big, you'll find 'im easy. Did them chickens really pick him clean?"

"Every scrap," I told her. The smell of the room was bothering me now, so I thanked her and escaped while she wagged her head and mulled over the gruesome details.

A car pulled up next to me filled with what looked to be three generations of a family. The man driving asked me, "Where's the grave, Mister?" I told him I didn't know. He conferred with the women beside him and cruised on around the cemetery road, look-

ing for a fresh grave.

I FOUND MR. SCRITCHFIELD in the corner of the cemetery on his knees with a spatula and a hod of Sackrete, laying a footer for the stone at the head of a recent grave. He was a lanky old fellow, gaunt as a totem pole, with sinewy wrists poking out of a frayed gray workshirt whose arms were too short for him. As soon as he saw my shadow he pushed back the bill of his cap and squinted at me.

"This the grave that opened by itself?" I asked him.

He looked up the road and made a slight movement with the spatula in that direction. "Up there."

I glanced around. "How far?"

"Just off the road there at the bend. Nothing to see, though. Just a grave is all."

"I understand there's no stone."

"Lots of graves without stones. Look around, this is an old place. They disappear over the years."

The irritation in his voice prompted me to identify myself and hope he'd be as impressed as the woman in the house. So I did, but he wasn't.

He stopped and stared up at me. "They got grown men writing for that, eh?"

"A couple of us."

He nodded grimly. "My wife reads that crap. I don't." He went back to laying the footer. I put my hands in my pockets and gave

Riverview a quick scan. Part of what I had called its charm was an advancing decrepitude.

Many of the stones and small mausoleums had turned gray from mold and lichens, and the retaining walls that terraced the slope were all leaning, some precariously. Several old trees seemed to be sliding downhill, dragging their roots behind them.

After a minute or so, Scritchfield said, "You still here?"

"Yes, I've got some questions."

"Well, I appreciate yer shadow on me, fella, but when I stop appreciating it, it better be gone. You might do well to follow it. I done told Jay Dent's boy and the police all I know about that little boy's grave, and I don't like repeating myself. It's a bad habit to get into at my age."

Little boy's grave? That stopped me cold for a moment. The article had simply said it was a child's grave, unmarked. Unless there was something masculine about the coffin, it was my guess that old Scritchfield and the others had opened it just to look inside.

Surely, the undertaker had wanted to check his theory about the gases. And curiosity would have itched at the others. Yet the paper had mentioned nothing about the casket being opened — certainly a noteworthy part of the story, I wondered why. So I hit Scritchfield direct:

"Was the little boy in good shape?"

He nicked the cement he was trying to smooth out, then quietly composed himself and stared at me deliberately. "What little boy?"

"The little boy in the casket."

"Did I say it was a little boy? We don't know who was inside that box."

Instead of pointing out his own slip of the tongue, I struggled to recall the funeral director's name and coughed it out of my muddled morning memory. "That's not what Mr. Godeau told me," I bluffed, hoping I was pronouncing it correctly.

The old fellow studied me with a squint, then thought the matter important enough to stand his ground. He took his good old time getting up, nursing all his aches and pains as he did so. "What did he tell ya, if anything?" He tilted his head at me curiously, his eyes glinting in the shadow of his cap bill.

"Not much. He just said you opened the casket and there was a little boy inside."

"That's a damned lie and he knows it!"

"It is?"

"That's right," Scritchfield told me. "He opened that casket, not me. It was *his* idea, not mine. So if somebody wants to take anybody to court, send 'em to Godeau's. Don't bother with me."

I fished a pad and pen from my pocket and placated him by writing — and reading as I wrote

it — "Godeau opened the casket."

"That's right," the old man snapped, with a jerk of his chin. "Now I told him, I said, 'Looky here, we shouldn't do that, Mr. Godeau,' but he's a Godeau and thinks the bathroom don't stink when he leaves, so he just went ahead and opened it. But I fought him tooth *and* nail. Put that down."

I doodled on my pad and recited, "Tooth *and* nail."

"You got it right, son."

"Describe what you saw when Godeau opened the casket."

"Well, sir, he thought maybe gas from the body blowed the grave open, ya see. I mean, when I found that grave yesterday morning the sod was pushed up *this* high."

He stooped and held a hand about a foot off the ground.

"I looked down with my flashlight and seen the vault was broken. And when we dug it up to put the new vault in, well sir, that old vault — solid as rock, it was — come out in seven pieces. Blowed apart at the seams, and the lid was cracked in two.

"So Godeau said, 'Looky here,' he says, 'we oughta open this casket.' Course now, I told him, I says, 'Mr. Godeau, the casket's in good shape,' I says to him. But he wouldn't listen to me."

"So Mr. Godeau opened the lid," I said as gospel fact.

"That's right, *he* opened it. I was over getting me a drink of

water at the time. Casket wasn't sealed or anything like that. Just two latches, and Godeau opened them." The old caretaker rubbed his hands as if to rid himself of all blame and nodded deeply to add finality to his statement.

I doodled some more. "Getting a drink of water," I said slowly, to make him happy.

"That's right. Digging makes a man thirsty."

"All right, so Godeau opened the casket," I said again. "Now, what did you see?"

A strange presence came over Okie Scritchfield as the scene passed through his head. He stepped back a little to allow room for his face to fall with what seemed to be a reverential awe. He kept rubbing his hands together until the knuckles whitened, and his eyes raked the grass for a moment. His tall narrow shoulders had dropped like an old buzzard's. All the vigor and cussedness had been sapped out of him.

"Well, sir, that casket, I know had to have been there at least 50-60 years. That's a fairly old area up there, and besides they don't make caskets like that anymore. It was wooden, fashioned over with cloth, though dry rot had got to the cloth mostly. And there was a little bit of carving on the wood. That casket was handmade, my friend. I know they haven't made a box like that in at least 50 years. No, sir."

This was all very interesting. It

gave me excellent detail for my readers to pour over. But I still hadn't pushed the old fellow inside that casket, and he seemed reluctant to go.

"An old casket," I said to my pad. To Scritchfield I added, "So that meant the little boy was in pretty bad shape when you looked in and saw him."

"No!" he said. "Looked just like the day they laid him there. Why, his little hands were shaped as perfect as... well, sir, they were perfect, that's all. And his hair was as gold as a brakeman's watch, just a-glowing there in the sun. If it hadn't been for the casket, I'd have sworn they buried him last week."

Now that we had reached the heart of the story, I popped the little question that generally yields highly quotable answers. "What do you think lies behind all this?"

"I don't think. I know," he told me.

"You don't think you know?"

"No sir, that's not what I said. I said I don't *think*. I *know* what happened yesterday. God's letting us know He's out there."

I couldn't tell if he was putting me on or not. In any case, I didn't pursue the matter because I never included too much metaphysics in my articles for fear the editors might assign me to *Predictions for the Coming Year* column. An occasional clairvoyant and exorcist was enough for me.

I thanked Mr. Scritchfield and

walked up the road to see the grave. It took a minute or two to find the grave, with help from him shouting, "No, to yer *right...yer other* right, Mr. Oxhead!"

He had taken pains to return it to its natural anonymity. The sod had been cut and peeled up, then later laid back over the tamped earth, leaving only a small rise. The grave lacked the presence of a phenomenon or miracle. It seemed hardly worth the trip down from Pittsburgh.

I jotted down the names and dates of the neighboring stones before going back to my car and leaving. I found Godeau's address at a pay phone while I was calling Marmaduke. Nobody at the *Dominion Post* had any idea where he was.

Godeau's, fortunately, was easier to track down. My map led me directly to an old Victorian home, once a showcase of middle class splendor, with a big white sign illuminated from within, poking out of a manicured hedge —*Godeau's Memorial Chapel*.

A DISTINGUISHED looking man in a dark suit and rich, maroon tapestry tie met me at the door and bowed his face toward mine. In a discreet, mouthwash-sweetened voice me asked me, "And whom do you wish to see, sir?"

"I'm looking for Mr. Godeau."

"I'm Mr. Godeau," he said, smiling. The smile seemed fixed there, as if nothing short of death could have removed it

(whereupon, I'm sure, it would be put back in place by another mortician).

I introduced myself and told him why I had come. He was obviously unfamiliar with the rag that paid my bills, and seemed concerned, though smilingly, about what the American *Inquirer* inquired about. I hastened to tell him that many of our advertisers were pillars of the funeral industry. That relieved him greatly.

"You want to talk to my oldest son, Robert," he told me. "Will you follow me, please?"

I did, through the Tudor-framed hallway, past several floral-stinking siderooms. Thick tan carpets soaked up our footsteps. The hushed quiet was so heavy I thought maybe they had sprayed it around out of an aerosol can.

We stopped at a little office room in the back of the house, where a younger Godeau replica sat behind the desk cultivating a sympathetic and benign countenance.

"Robert," said Mr. Godeau, "this man is a reporter, and he wishes to talk to you about..." his voice dropped confidentially. "...the child's grave that opened yesterday." Then he nodded goodbye and returned to the foyer.

Robert walked around his desk and sat on the front edge of it. He had the build and carriage of a young man who had played college sports within the last ten

years. "I thought Mr. Dent was handling this story," he said, unsmiling. Being either more practical or less conditioned than his father, he didn't use his smile when it wasn't needed.

"I'm from the American *Inquirer*, a nationwide tabloid, Mr. Godeau."

He arched an eyebrow and looked me over to see how nationwide reporters were getting along these days. Satisfied that I was dressed much less prosperously than he, young Godeau cordially invited me to take a plush visitor's seat, the only funereal item in the room. The rest of the office had been designed without curtains, flowers, ornate furniture or plaques bearing platitudes to ease the heart. "Since when do we rate national coverage Mr. —"

"Oxendine. Well, Mr. Godeau, you'll have to admit that coffins don't pop out of the ground every day."

"Well, Mr. Oxendine, that casket didn't actually *pop* out of the ground."

"Still, the grave opened by itself."

"So it seems, Mr. Oxendine." He went back around his desk and sat down again. "But I'm sure these things happen from time to time. Ground slippage, probably, I'm told."

When I asked him to tell me about the disinterment, he willingly obliged, but he omitted the little lid-opening scene.

I innocently capped his narrative with, "You forgot about opening the casket and finding the golden-haired boy inside."

Godeau blinked a few times, fidgeted with a huge ring on his right hand, then settled back in his chair to regard me as a serious person. "Where'd you hear that?"

"From reliable sources, Mr. Godeau. It seems natural to me that you'd want to inspect the body. I don't see why you're reluctant to talk about it."

He leaned toward me, bracing himself on his forearm. "Mr. Oxendine, I'm in the business of closing caskets, not opening them. Under normal circumstances an exhumation order would have been required. However, since the grave was already opened . . ." He shrugged. "There was no authority for anyone to open that lid, but it *was* opened, as you say it was. But not by me. Mr. Fenton authored that idea."

"Mr. Fenton?"

"Tom Fenton. The president of the Riverview Cemetery Association."

I jotted the name on my pad. "Who else was there?"

"Well, the two diggers, Mr. Scritchfield and his assistant. Mrs. Scritchfield was there. A policeman, briefly. A couple of other people who nosied in for lack of anything better to do. And, of course, myself."

"So, Mr. Fenton is the one who

physically opened the lid."

Godeau cleared his throat and fixed his eyes on the wall above my head. "Well, no — ah — I unlatched the lid, at Mr. Fenton's insistence, and Mr. Scritchfield opened it with a shovel."

"With a shovel?"

"Uh, yes, we all stood back."

Finally he smiled for me, but uncomfortably. "The smell, Mr. Oxendine."

I said I understood.

"But I would greatly appreciate your leaving my name out of this, Mr. Oxendine."

I said I would. "Another witness," I added, "told me the little boy was in perfect shape. That true?"

Godeau leaned back and smiled knowingly. "Mr. Scritchfield!" He nodded to himself. "He couldn't get over how perfect the boy was. Actually, Mr. Oxendine, the boy wasn't that well preserved.

"I mean, he was in remarkably good shape for someone interred a half century ago, but the ravages of time were there. I guess Mr. Scritchfield wasn't looking very closely. He was very quick to chalk it up to a divine miracle."

"What were these ravages of time?" I asked him, posing my pen to jot down the juicy tidbits for my readers to tsk over next week.

"Well, the boy's skin had dehydrated, and there was mold. And there was a hole in the top of his head."

That perked me up and made my writing hand stutter. "Hole?"

"Yes. He was a child, no more than three years old, probably a victim of cholera or some other disease common to children in those days. He still had his soft spot, the plates of the skull hadn't fused together yet."

I wrote it all down.

Godeau smacked his hands together and clasped them as firmly as an important handshake. "I shouldn't be telling you this, Mr. Oxendine, but since you've promised to be fair with me I'll return the favor." He coughed and shifted toward me conspiratorially. "Mr. Dent, the reporter, took several pictures . . . ah . . ." He let the information dangle.

"Of the boy," I prompted him.

Godeau nodded. "I noticed they weren't used in either last evening's or this morning's paper, out of deference, I'm sure, or both the boy's family and the sensibilities of the readers. I commend Mr. Dent for that. But I'm sure he'd allow you to see them."

I thanked him very much, left his office, and said goodbye to his father on the way out. I called the *Dominion Post* from a corner phone and got what was becoming a stock answer — Mr. Dent hadn't shown up this morning. Marmaduke's name was in the phone book, so I fished another dime out of my pocket. I let his phone ring for a full minute before hanging up.

The map let me backtrack through the downtown area, where I noted the location of the courthouse, then across several bridges and over a hill or two to the *Dominion Post* Building. This time I was determined to stay completely out of the editor's way and find a young hotshot reporter to help me.

She wasn't long in stepping into my life. A plain girl, but plain in an attractive way, with none of her idiosyncracies smoothed over by Hollywood hairstyles or fun-in-the-sun makeup. She wore jeans and a long sleeved shirt with the sleeves lapped up twice, a pencil behind her ear and a fresh eager look unspoiled by the usual reporter's cynicism. Obviously she was just out of journalism school.

I gave her my card and told her I was personally working with Marmaduke on the casket story. She nodded and smiled. "So you guys really do dig up these kinky stories," she said. "I thought you sat in an attic somewhere and just made them up."

I TRIED TO LOOK indignant. "Are you accusing us of yellow journalism and scandal mongering?"

"I'm accusing you of fabricating a tabloid full of garbage," she told me.

"Oh, well that's different. You're forgiven."

She led me to a deadline-scarred metal desk that Herodotus might

have used to report the Persian Wars. We shuffled through the mess on top of it and came up with Marmaduke's first draft of the casket article. Someone had edited out a whole paragraph about the casket being opened. In a hastier, different handwriting, somebody had scribbled the name Jarvis Collins on the top of the page.

"I think this is what you're looking for," she said, lifting a 9-by-12 manila envelope out of a bottom drawer and handing it to me. I pulled the photos out.

"Oh my God!" she moaned, flinching for a moment before her reporter's instinct got the better of her.

I couldn't imagine why Scritchfield had thought the little boy looked perfect, unless of course the camera or the black-and-white film had made the mold more pronounced. It pocked his face. The flesh had dehydrated, stretched itself against the skull, and pulled the boy's mouth into a sly grin that suggested maybe he knew something we didn't.

But Scritchfield had been correct about the rest of the boy. His hands had somehow kept their fine-boned shape, and his long hair possessed the texturous gleam of spun gold. A long-gone mortician had laid him out in a gray-toned shroud and tucked a Teddy bear at his feet — a picture of classic American Gothic.

From writing an article on Teddy bears not more than a

month earlier, I recognized the child's toy as an Austrian Steiff based upon the original 1902 Teddy Bear, which in turn was named after then-President Roosevelt. That at least dated the grave after 1902.

The other photos had been taken during the exhumation, beginnings with a close-up of the broken sod and ending with the grave fully opened and the casket lying on the grass next to the heaped slabs of what had been the vault.

I counted a total of nine faces in those photos — Mr. and Mrs. Scritchfield, Godeau, a portly fellow who looked like the man pushing the baby carriage on the "Advance to Boardwalk" Chance card (this was Mr. Fenton), a slack-jawed kid with a shovel, a cop and three neighbors who stood around with their arms locked across their chests, studiously avoiding looking into the camera but obviously very much aware of it.

I found it interesting that the most static, innocuous picture — one showing the backs of Scritchfield and his helper as they took a breather from digging — was the photo chosen to make the front page.

Somehow, the whole thing, the composite picture that had been forming inside my head, had a discordant image lurking somewhere. I could hear the young reporter chattering away next to

me, but my mind was elsewhere.

I checked the photos again, studied the faces frozen on paper, and felt envious of them, as if they were witnessing some event that I would be muddling over and trying to reconstruct for years to come. I tried to find clues in their expressions, their eyes, their shadows, but I came away from this fool's game with nothing but a headache.

"You're really getting into those photos," she was saying.

I slipped them back into the envelope and replaced it in Marmaduke's drawer. They were no good to me unless I got permission to use them later. I thanked my young friend and left.

In a phone booth I called the County Records room at the courthouse and tracked down a lady who had chased Marmaduke out yesterday at closing time. No, he didn't say anything to her and, no, she didn't know what books he was looking at.

Next, I called the Riverview Cemetery Association and was told that Mr. Fenton would be back in a half-hour. By the time I reached his office on High Street, Mr. Fenton was in. In real life he still looked like the jolly fellow on the Chance card.

"Hello, Mr. Oxendine," he greeted me warmly. "I'm Tom Fenton. F-E-N-T-O-N."

"You're expecting me."

"Yes, but I'm afraid there's not much I can tell you, if you're

wanting to know who the little boy was. Like I told Duke Dent yesterday, the pre-1937 burial records were partly destroyed during the big flood. Many stones have been badly weathered or vandalized. Consequently some of the bodies beneath them are regrettably lost to memory and record. I'm afraid the little boy is one of them," Fenton, F-E-N-T-O-N, lamented.

I asked him when he last saw Marmaduke.

"Yesterday afternoon, about four or so. He left here for the courthouse."

"I understand you ordered the casket opened."

He showed me the palms of his hands. "Now wait one second, Mr. Oxendine. True, I gave authority, but only after Mr. Godeau suggested — rather strongly — that we substantiate his theory about gases from the body. It was something that had to be done, under the circumstances."

I said, "Now he seems to think ground slippage caused the vault to open."

Mr. Fenton took that as an attack on his hallowed ground. "Nobody knows that, Mr. Oxendine!" he snapped. "And I certainly don't want such a ridiculous idea spread to the newspapers."

He was in no mood to talk to me any more, so I left and went to a nearby coffee shop. Stirring my black coffee was like trying to stir through the murk of my thoughts.

What could be the connection between a long-dead boy and the men who opened his casket?

Fenton was at least 50 years old, and Scritchfield about 65. The elder Godeau was certainly closing in on 60 and if his father had started the family business, perhaps he had been the one to lay the boy out and tuck him in with his Teddy bear a half-century ago. Did the casket contain a long-lost brother, an heir to a family fortune, a skeleton for a family closet, an old smudge that could sully a modern reputation?

I drove back to the *Dominion Post* and asked around when Marmaduke had last been seen in the city room. One reporter remembered him stopping briefly at his desk last night, after sundown. Then I got permission to plow into the paper's old files.

For starters, I turned to the page in my notepad on which I'd listed the names and dates of the stones of the surrounding graves. To the right of the boy were two Collinseys, both of whom had died in the Twenties. So I went looking for their obituaries on the micro-film spools of old *Dominion Posts*, hoping to find a reference to other members of the family.

There's no sense in my going into detail, other than to say I quickly tracked down Lydia Collins, died 1924, who had been buried next to the grave of her young son who had died "several years ago."

I spent the next hour or two checking the obituaries, starting at 1922 and working my way back, until I found young Jarvis Edward Collins, born 1915, died Sept. 1, 1918. The name was familiar to me. I wrote down the details — cause of death (influenza), the family's address, names of survivors, the funeral home that conducted the burial (it wasn't Godeau's).

Suddenly I remembered where I had seen the name. I returned to Marmaduke's desk, now occupied by an evening-shift reporter, and asked to see the blue-penciled article on the grave opening. It was still lying in a heap on one of the corners. Marmaduke had written Jarvis Collins on the top of it, but nothing else. I handed it back to the reporter and left.

IT WAS GETTING on to eight o'clock and the summer daylight was beginning to drain out of the sky. Riverview had turned gray by the time I got there. It appeared more decrepit than before, with its darkened marble stones and sagging walls, looking as if it all might slide off the hill before morning, make a big splash in the Monongahela and become part of the river view.

A dim yellow light illuminated the door and window of the front room of the single-story Scritchfield house. The television was flickering on the door curtains as

I walked across the porch, and Carol Burnett's voice was screaming. I knocked during a long audience laugh.

Mr. Scritchfield pulled aside the curtain when the laugh ended, closed it, said something in a low tone to his wife, then opened the door. Another laugh rolled out of the box and hit me full square, alone with a blast of musty odor, the same one that had driven me off earlier — but it was much weaker now.

"Yessir, Mr. Oxhead, can I help ya?"

"Invite the man in, Okie!" his wife commanded.

He grudgingly pushed the screen door open and stepped back. Mrs. Scritchfield was sitting in one of the wicker rockers with an American *Inquirer* laying absently in her lap, probably for a quick reference during commercials.

"We was just talkin' 'bout you," she told me, indicating the other wicker rocker. I glanced to make sure the cellophane bag I had seen there earlier had been removed, then sat down. The seat was warm. Mr. Scritchfield was looking at me, his cheeks sunken with displeasure at losing his chair.

"Sir over there, Okie," she told him, nodding to a flowered stuffed chair against the wall.

"I'll stand here," he told her. "Can't see the tv so well from over there."

"Suit yerself," she said, straining her voice above another burst of laughter. She turned to me and smoothed the paper in her lap. "Like I say, we been talkin' 'bout you."

I glanced at the tabloid. I could tell from the photo of Shaun Cassidy that it was about a month old. *Why I'll Never Marry, Says Shaun* screamed the headlines. My next assignment would probably be writing about his roots. I'd forgotten which articles of mine were included in that issue.

Seeing that she was the authority in the room, I asked her, "Can we turn the tv down a little?"

"Certainly, we can." She fixed her eyes on her husband and jerked her head in the set's direction.

"Here, I'll turn it down," he volunteered cheerfully, to give the effect he had decided to do it of his own accord.

"Mr. Scritchfield, we've found out that the little boy was buried in 1918," I told him. "Do you know who was caretaker here then?"

He shook his head. "I only came here in 1946. The missus here and myself, we're from up Terra Alta way. I'd ask my boss, Mr. Fenton, if I was you."

"You write such interesting articles, Mr. Oxendine," his wife cut in, patting the American *Inquirer*. "Do you know who

the little boy was?"

"Yes," I said to them both. "His name was Collins."

"Just like the stones next to him," Scritchfield observed.

"His parents," I said.

"Ain't that something?" Mrs. Scritchfield was still patting that old *Inquirer*, smoothing it down every few seconds. The way she suddenly jerked her eyes up at me was a clear signal she meant to change the conversation.

"I see here" — she patted the tabloid again — "yer a real expert on Teddy bears, Mr. Oxendine."

Oh yes, that issue had contained my Teddy bear article. "Not really. I just talked to experts and collectors."

"Very interesting," she reflected, stroking the paper like a kitten. "I had a Teddy when I was a girl, Mr. Oxendine. That was many years ago, of course. They're valuable now, I understand, the old ones."

"Yes, I agreed, trying to remember what I knew about them. "Serious collectors will pay anywhere from 500 to 1000 for some Teddy bears."

She tapped the paper. "You've listed some collectors here I see. How do they find old Teddys anymore?" She gazed at me directly. "You seen any Teddys lately, Mr. Oxendine?"

"Yes, I . . ." A twinge in the back of my mind cut me short. I didn't like Scritchfield's gaunt

presence standing over me, or the way his wife's eyes and words were probing me as she drew some mystical power from that American *Inquirer* on her lap.

I could still detect the nostril-drying smell of something old and parched, maybe moldy. The stuffed animal in the smokey cellophane bag had been sitting where I sat now! A flashy girl on television was slinking around with hose that clings to your legs instead of bagging.

"He knows," Mrs. Scritchfield intoned to her husband. "You know, don't ya?" she asked me.

"Know what?"

She was looking at Scritchfield and flicking her eyes to a point in the room past my head. I remembered the mantel behind me, covered with bric-a-brac and several badly painted Jesus statuettes, suitable for use as clubs. My heart slipped into my stomach as surely as the rolling cemetery outside was gradually slipping its way downhill toward the river.

Sensing Scritchfield moving behind me, I tumbled forward out of the chair and threw myself in the direction of the door. Stupidly I caught one foot on Scritchfield's hassock and fell onto the tv. Tim Conway deadpanned a joke in my ear as I fought to keep off my knees. Mrs. Scritchfield's ragged figure had moved quickly into the periphery of my sight and grabbed my pants leg.

"Hurry up, - hurry up, you

idiot!" she shrieked at the old man lumbering across the room at me with gaudy colors flashing in his hands. I planted my shoe in the old woman's face and used it to propel me forward.

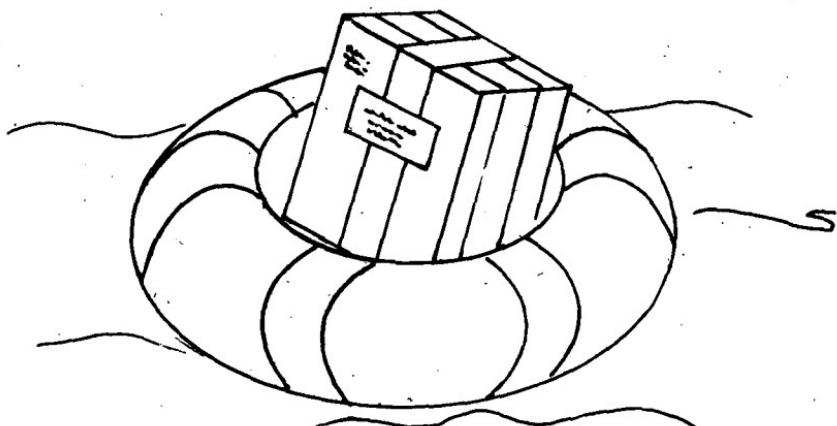
As I opened the curtained door a plaster Jesus shattered against my shoulder. I dived through the screen feeling wood splinters and wire cutting my face, and rushed headlong into the porch and over the bannister. I scrambled away into the night as Mrs. Scritchfield stood on her lighted porch and screamed for her husband to stop me.

I wrapped up my story the next day. LaSalle didn't seem to mind the delay, which was nice of him, considering the American *Inquirer* had scooped a sensational, bizarre murder case. The Morgantown police opened the little boy's grave, found Marmaduke's body dumped on top of the vault with his head split open by a shovel, then rounded up the old couple and the Teddy bear and took them downtown.

My reporter's heart truly went out to Marmaduke. He had stumbled onto a little scoop of his own, a grave robbery of a child's toy, and become the most important part of his story against his will.

And me? Once I got off my story I drove on to Athens, Ohio, that evening, on LaSalle's orders. It seems the university there had a chimpanzee that talked with his hands.

Double Cross



by WILLIAM MILLER

What's a Man to Do When His Bookie Makes Him Use His Yacht to Run Dope? It Took Ted Walsh a Little Time, but He Did It.

TED WALSH LOOKED up and groaned. His bookie, Artie was heading down the pier straight for his boat, where he sprawled in a deck chair in the cockpit surrounded by the Sunday papers and several empty beer cans. Artie reached the boat, slung a short leg over the cockpit railing and, after some awkward teetering on the gunwale, managed to gain the cockpit. He sat in the stern seat, pulled out a hand-

kerchief and mopped a face that glowed as red as the hair above it.

"*Whew!*" he exclaimed. "I thought you bought a boat to get the cool sea breezes."

"Once I leave the marina and get out on the open water, you'd be surprised how cool it gets," said Walsh. "Help yourself to a beer in the fridge."

When Artie came out on deck with a can of beer in his hand,

he looked down at the scattered newspapers.

"Don't bother to figure out tomorrow's bets. As of now you've got no credit with me until you pay up the ten grand you owe me."

"I told you last week I don't have that kind of dough."

"You own a printing business," said Artie. "You must be making money from that. That's why I let you run up such a large tab."

"Business has been slow. As soon as it picks up I'll pay you."

"I've heard that before. If you'd cut out entertaining the dames in your apartment and on this boat you'd have the dough."

Artie finished his beer and stood up. "You've got exactly one week to payup. I'll be here next Sunday if I don't hear from you."

He climbed over the railing and was gone.

Later on, after he showered, Walsh stood in front of the cabin mirror with a towel wrapped around his waist. Maybe he should cut out the gals. The trouble was they were so easy to get. After all, he wasn't a bad looking guy. At 40 he still had plenty of dark hair and his muscular, six-foot frame wasn't bad to look at, even though a small beer belly was starting to show.

Sunday, a week later, Walsh

was in his usual position in the deck chair when he saw Artie coming down the pier, only this time another man walked at his side. As they climbed aboard Walsh looked at Artie's companion. Medium build, black hair, eyes and brows and a pair of thick shoulders that threatened to burst the seams of his jacket. Walsh knew his type. He'd seen a friend of his taken apart by a carbon copy of this guy. Artie and the other man stood looking down at Walsh.

"I didn't hear from you this week," said Artie.

Walsh shrugged. "I don't have the money."

"In that case, meet Nick Taney," said Artie.

Taney flipped open his jacket to reveal a shoulder holster filled with a revolver.

"Let's go," he said.

Walsh didn't argue. He got up and went with them. In the parking lot, Taney steered him to a long black sedan, opened a rear door and pushed him inside. As Walsh sat down, he became aware of another man sitting in the back seat. Taney took the seat beside the driver but turned halfway around, keeping his eyes fixed on Walsh. Artie had disappeared. The car moved off, heading across town.

"Artie tells me you've welched on ten grand."

Walsh turned his head to

look at the speaker. In an expensive restaurant at lunch time, the man would blend in with dozens of successful-looking business executives, but Walsh knew that he wasn't the kind of person who'd be interested in balance sheets and earnings statements.

"I haven't welched," Walsh said. "I just need some time."

"I like Artie," said the other man. "He handles all my bets. When he told me about you, I agreed to speak to you."

Walsh remained silent.

"You're a business man. Why don't you get a loan from your bank. Ten grand isn't that much."

Walsh thought about the outstanding loans that he already had with his bank, he shook his head.

"I understand you have a boat. What kind is it?"

"It's a thirty-five-foot cabin cruiser," said Walsh.

"Is it fast?"

"She's got two engines. She can move when she has to."

The car turned south, passing derelict piers and burned-out warehouses.

"I'll tell you what we'll do," said the other man. "let me borrow your boat and I'll take care of the ten that you owe Artie."

"What! You'll pay ten thousand to use my boat."

"Right. With you at the wheel."

Walsh shook his head. "It's

got to be something crooked. I can't go along with it."

The car made a left turn, drove slowly behind an abandoned shed, and stopped. Taney slid from the front seat and opened the rear door.

"Out." He motioned to Walsh with a gun which had suddenly appeared in his right hand. Walsh sat, frozen with fear, unable to move. His voice quavered.

"Look, I'll sell my boat and pay Artie."

"Too late," said the other man

Walsh knew when he was licked. He sank back into the seat. "Okay, Ray, I'll do it."

Taney got back into the car.

"Nick, I'm putting you in charge of the operation," said the other man.

Taney's eyes opened and he sat up in the seat.

"You mean I'm promoted, boss?"

"That's right. You'll be filled in on the details later."

"You," the other man spoke to Walsh, "will wait for a phone call from Taney. You'll follow orders."

Walsh was dropped off at the marina and, as he walked down to his boat in the warm June evening, he wondered what he was getting into.

The days passed swiftly, with Walsh spending most of his time at his printing plant.

Ironically he landed a couple of lucrative contracts the day after his ride with Taney and his boss. He would have been able to borrow against the jobs.

Then on the last Friday of the month, Taney called him at his apartment. He was short and to the point.

"Be on your boat at ten o'clock tomorrow night. Have it ready to go."

The next night Taney appeared right on time, and Walsh, who was at the controls of the flying bridge direct him in casting off the lines. The boat slipped quietly out of the marina heading into the river.

"Where do we go from here?" Walsh asked Taney, who had climbed the ladder to the flying bridge and was sitting beside him.

"Go down the river to the freight anchorage."

Walsh turned the wheel to port and advanced the throttles. It was a warm, dark night, with just a slight breeze ruffling the incoming tide, and Walsh thought how he would have enjoyed a cruise tonight with one of his girl friends. Taney broke the silence.

"Do you have a pole that I can use to pick up something from the water?"

"You mean a boat-hook," said Walsh. "I've got one clipped to the side of the cockpit."

Half an hour later, the riding lights of about a dozen freighters,

that were using the anchorage, came into view. Each ship had its bow pointed downstream into the pocket, bent down, and tested it on the floor. It showed a red beam of light. He switched off the light and looked at Walsh.

"Okay, we're to look for a white light flashing three times from the back of one of these boats."

"You mean that someone is going to signal us from the stern of one of these ships," said Walsh.

"Yeah, that's right."

Walsh throttled back on both engines and the boat crept between the lines of anchored freighters. The sides of the ships loomed high above them and they strained their eyes to see a signal.

Suddenly, a white light blinked three times from a freighter that was riding ahead and to starboard. As Walsh swung the wheel to line the boat up with the stern of the vessel ahead, Taney stood up and pressed the button of his flashlight three times. Again the white light flashed.

"That's it," said Taney.

He climbed down the ladder to the cockpit and moments later appeared on the forward deck carrying the boat hook in his right hand. Walsh felt a grudging admiration. For a man who wasn't used to boats, Taney could sure handle himself on one.

They were about fifty feet from the freighter when Walsh

saw a white life-ring drop from the stern. It was attached to a long line and when it splashed in the water it began to float down toward the cabin cruiser, pushed by the tide. When they were almost upon it, Walsh shifted both engines into neutral. As the boat lost way, Taney reached over the bow rail and hooked on to the life ring.

He drew it on deck and unhooked the line. As Walsh let the tide carry them away from the freighter the line disappeared into the blackness overhead. When Walsh saw that Taney was safely in the cockpit, he shifted into gear.

"Where to now?" he called.

"Back to the marina," Taney ordered and then disappeared into the cabin.

When they reached the marina and Walsh had secured the boat, he went into the cabin. A package, wrapped in waterproof covering, had been removed from the life-ring and lay on the cabin table.

"Give me something to wrap this package in," said Taney.

Walsh rummaged around and came up with a brown paper bag.

"What's in the package?" he asked.

"None of your business."

"It's dope, isn't it?"

"Shut up and listen," said Taney. "We're going to walk out of the marina together. You carry this bag. The watchman knows you and he won't ask any ques-

tions. When we get to my car you give it back to me."

And that was how it went.

Three days later, Walsh received a call from Artie.

"I got paid, Ted. We're square. Your credit's good with me again."

"I don't like your friends, Artie."

"Don't be sore, Ted."

"Goodbye, Artie," said Walsh, and hung up.

June slipped into July and Walsh kept occupied with his business during the day, his girl friends at night, and his boat on weekends. He had cut down his play on the horses, business had picked up, and he was paying off his bank loans fast. Things looked rosy.

He was awakened late on a Sunday morning by the steady ringing of his doorbell. He staggered up and into his gathrobe, opened the door, and saw Taney push past him into the living room.

"Anyone in there?" Taney cocked a thumb toward the bedroom.

"No."

"Okay, we've got a job to do tonight."

Walsh flopped on to the sofa and tried to clear his head.

"What are you talking about?"

"A job, with your crazy boat. Like we did the last time."

"You're crazy, I didn't agree to do any more jobs."

Taney walked over, grabbed

Walsh by the front of his robe and yanked him to his feet.

"You're in with us, now. You can't back out."

He shoved Walsh down on the sofa

"Be on your boat at ten o'clock tonight," he said.

When Taney left, Walsh poured himself a stiff drink and knocked it back. What could he do? They had him cold. He could see the thing stretching into the future, trip after trip, and if something went wrong he'd wind up behind bars for a long time.

He'd have to go out in the boat tonight, but after that he'd have to figure some way out of this nightmare. He was scared.

That night, everything went as smoothly as the first time and Walsh felt a great relief as he docked the boat. In the cabin, Taney was wrapping up the package.

"What did you do with the life-ring the last time?" he asked.

"I cut it up and threw it in the garbage," said Walsh.

"Okay, you can do the same with this one. I'll be over to your place sometime during the week with the payoff."

He shoved the package at Walsh. "Let's go."

That evening, Walsh sat in his living room for a long time in deep thought, and next morning he made a telephone call from his office to one of his business

competitors. It was the first step in his plan to get out of the dope-running racket.

Wednesday evening, Taney dropped in at his apartment and left a bundle of hundred-dollar bills totalling ten thousand dollars. The next day Walsh put the money in his safe-deposit box.

On Saturday morning, Walsh took out a couple of his fishing buddies, Dick Manzo and Charlie O'Hara, and they spent the whole day fishing, drinking beer and talking.

When Walsh got home that night, he felt that he had begun to make the right moves, but only time would tell if they would pay off.

The third trip down to the anchorage, two weeks later, almost proved to be the end of Taney. A half-gale was blowing out of the southeast against the tide, causing the freighter to swing sideways.

The life-ring was blown out of the water, then dropped back into it, and as Walsh maneuvered the boat against the wind and rain he could see Taney on the grip.

After Taney had missed the life-ring several times, a fluke of the wind blew the ring against his chest. He dropped the boat-hook, grabbed the life-ring and had just unhooked the line, when a sideways plunge of the boat sent him sliding over the port bow.

At the last second, he grabbed the railing with one hand and hung over the side, still gripping the life-ring with the other. Walsh drove the boat away from the freighter's side and slipped both engines into neutral.

As he ran down the ladder he knew this was the only chance he'd ever get to eliminate Taney. But what good would it do? Someone else would take Taney's place and nothing would be changed. When he reached the bow deck his mind was made up. He reached down and pulled Taney back on board.

On the way back to the marina Taney sat in the cabin drinking one shot of whiskey after another. By the time they docked he was in no shape to drive a car. They spent the night on board and, when Taney drove away from the dock the next mornig, Walsh decided to make his final moves during the coming week.

When Taney delivered the pay-off money to Walsh's apartment during the week, he was invited to join Walsh at the marina bar on Saturday afternoon.

For the next few days, Walsh was a very busy man and, when Saturday arrived, he greeted Taney warmly.

"You're my guest today, Taney. Drink up."

"What's going on?"

"I'm celebrating," said Walsh.

"You getting married?"

"No, I sold my boat."

"You *what!*" The words exploded from Taney's massive chest. The few people who are at the bar looked over at the two men.

"Let's go outside," said Walsh. "I'll explain."

He steered Taney to a quiet corner of the sundeck that overlooked the marina.

"Wait'll the boss hears about this," said Taney. "You're dead."

"He doesn't have to hear about it. Didn't he put you in charge of the operation? That means he doesn't want to be bothered about details. All he wants is for you to deliver the goods."

Taney looked bewildered.

"I still need a boat."

"Look," Walsh pointed. "There's the boat in the same slip. You see those two guys in the cockpit? They bought the boat. Their names are Dick Manzo and Charlie O'Hara and they're crazy about fishing. When I offered them the boat for a reasonable price, they jumped at the chance."

Taney still looked bewildered.

"How does that help me?"

"Let me tell you. It cost them every cent they had to buy the boat. They even borrowed money. Each of them has a wife and a bunch of kids. They're strapped for cash. You see what that means? All you have to do is to offer them the same deal that

you gave me. They'll jump at the chance to make ten grand. In fact, I'll bet they'll take five grand. You can pocket five for yourself."

Taney's heavy face crinkled into a smile.

"That's good, I like that."

"Not only that, you remember the last run we made? You almost went overboard. Now you'll have another guy to help you on deck."

Taney nodded. "I'll do it."

"Okay," Walsh slapped him on the back. "Go down there right now and talk to them. You can line them up for your next trip."

Walsh lingered on the sundeck and watched Taney lumber down

the pier and stop beside the boat. The two men looked up at him. After a few minutes of conversation, Taney stepped into the cockpit and the three of them went into the cabin.

Walsh smiled as he turned and walked toward the parking lot. In his car was an attache case crammed with cash from the sale of his business, the twenty grand from his two dope-running trips and the sale of his boat. He was about to begin a new life.

Of course, he had laid it on thick when he told Taney how desperate Monzo and O'Hara were for cash. He was sure they'd be interested in Taney's proposition.

After all, weren't they members of the City Narcotics Squad?

Complete In the Next Issue—

DEATH IN XANADU

The Thrilling New MIKE SHAYNE Short Novel

by JAMES M. REASONER

When a buccaneering young newspaper mogul's life is threatened, the Miami redhead is reluctant to take the case—not because of a lack of suspects but because there are too many. In short order, Shayne finds himself a potential target for the mysterious marksman and is forced to finding a solution to save his own skin.

After Class



by EDWARD D. HOCH

Race War was about to Detonate at John Adams High School. A Faculty Member Had Been Murdered and the Police Were Helpless. It Was up to History Instructor Jim Stannet to Keep the Volcano from Erupting.

JIM STANNET WAS humming a melody he had heard on his car radio as he crossed the parking lot toward the side entrance to John Adams High School. He was a minute or two late for his first afternoon history class, and he knew 35 students would be waiting with growing restlessness. Still, when LeRoi Fuller called his name with a bit of urgency from behind one of the parked cars, he paused to see what the boy wanted.

"*Stannet!* You come over here!"

"Hello, LeRoi. What's the trouble?"

LeRoi Fuller was tall and muscular and very black, with eyes that could bore a hole through

friends and enemies alike. He wore his hair nearly to his shoulders, and for this reason alone he stood out among the other black students, who were tending these days toward more Africanized hair styles. Perhaps he wore his hair that way because he was their leader, their spokesman in the growing tide of black militancy at the high school level.

"It's old Jackson. He's bugging me again. Came after me in English class this morning."

Claude Jackson was a middle-aged bachelor teacher with less than normal tolerance for the integrated conditions which had come to exist at Adams High in recent years. He sometimes seemed to seek out confrontations

with black students, as if daring them to strike back. And, of course, they did. A window in his car had been broken, a tire flattened. Fights between blacks and whites were frequent in the strained atmosphere of his classroom.

Stannet sighed at this new complaint about Jackson. He'd heard it all so many times before. "Look, try not to lose your cool, LeRoi. I'll talk to him, see what I can do."

He was ten years younger than Jackson, and the man wasn't likely to listen any more now than he had on such occasions in the past. But Stannet made the offer because he knew it would mollify Fuller, at least temporarily.

"Man, you think you can do anything against that bastard?"

"I can try, LeRoi. That's all any of us can do."

"Some of the fellas want to do more than just slash his tires. They want to slash *him*."

"What kind of talk is that? Haven't we had enough cutting already?" There had been a knifing after a basketball game the week before, and tensions were running high.

"Get him off my back, Stannet. He's one of yours."

Stannet sighed. One of his. Why did everything have to be black and white? "Come on, you're late for class."

A brown-skinned youth named Creed ambled by, coming from the battered ten-year-old car he drove daily to school. His father lived at home and held a steady job as a security guard, making him something of a rarity among LeRoi's circle of friends.

"Hurry up, Hair," he shouted. "It'll be time to go home soon!"

"Hair?" Stannet repeated. LeRoi seemed embarrassed. "Some of the guys started calling me that. They seen a show about these cats with long hair like mine..." He let the explanation drift off unfinished.

But at least LeRoi was walking now: Stannet fell into step beside him and they reached the side door a few paces behind Creed, who held the door for them.

"I'll see what I can do about that," Stannet told LeRoi as they parted in the hall. "Keep your cool."

He went on to his waiting history class, finding the expected turmoil of tumbling bodies and giggling girls. But once it settled down the class went well. These kids seemed truly interested in the period they were studying, with its clashes of armored knights and wars with English and French and terrible Turks. He had even assigned portions of *Froissart's Chroniques* to be read outside class, something he had never felt able to do with a high school class before.

Stannet's last class of the

afternoon was at two, and when it was over he drifted into the next room, where Bill Lord was instructing his math pupils. He had given them a series of complex problems and, while they sweated over them, he stepped into the hall to chat with Stannet.

Lord was about his age, with a ready smile that made him popular with the female faculty members and with some of the girl students as well. "How's it going, Jim?" he asked. "What's new in history today?"

"The usual stuff." Stannet longed for a cigarette, but the faculty smoking room was at the far end of the hall. "I have to talk with Jackson. He's been riding that boy Fuller again."

Bill Lord chuckled. "They really know when they've got a friend they can come running to."

"I hope so," Stannet replied, a bit coolly. "I'll talk to you later."

He moved away from Bill Lord and went down the hall to Claude Jackson's classroom. He knew this was a free period for Claude, and the balding man was inside, writing a list of German verbs on the blackboard.

"Ah, Jim! Good to see you! Let me finish this and we can talk."

Stannet sat at one of the desks, still wanting that cigarette, until

Jackson completed his verbs for the next class. Then he said, "I hear you've been having more trouble with that Fuller boy."

"LeRoi? Sure, I always have trouble with him! He thinks he and his friends own the school. English class is just a joke to them. It's getting so I look forward to my German classes. Not a black face in the room!"

"Don't we have enough trouble here without you treating them like that, Claude?"

"Trouble? You mean with Rozzo and the others wanting to fight the blacks?"

"That, and the knifing last week."

"Sure, we've got trouble. The damn school's like a jungle. But sometimes I can't help feeling that if Rozzo and Fuller cut each other up it would be the best thing for everybody. Get rid of a couple of troublemakers."

"You can't mean that," Stannet said quietly. "When you talk that way, you become part of the jungle yourself."

"That's the only way to survive."

Stannet sighed and stood up. "Try to go a bit easier on them. See if it doesn't help." He didn't wait for Jackson's reply, but went out into the hall.

Ordinarily on Mondays he would be headed for home by now, but there was something keeping him at Adams that

afternoon. Possibly a tension in the air, an unnamed fear that went with the April chill outside.

"Hello there," a voice said. He turned, recognizing Shirley Hart's familiar greeting.

"Hi, Shirley." She was blonde and not quite beautiful, with a wide sensual mouth that Stannet especially liked. In the under-staffed atmosphere of Adams High, her duties as school nurse were often supplemented with secretarial chores for the principal, Mr. Fraim.

"Are you finished for the day, Jim?" she asked. "I was wondering if you could help me with something."

"Always glad to. What is it?"

"Come up to my office where we can talk." She led the way to the top floor, where her little white-walled cubicle overlooked the parking lot. High school Nurses' offices had changed little since his own youth. There was still the bumpy cot against one wall, and the array of thermometers and bandages.

He imagined, remembering his own school days, that her patients were mainly the girls, worried over some mysterious female disorder, or simply wanting a place to rest. For the boys, only an especially bad fall or a bleeding cut would bring them reluctantly to the nurse's office. Knifings were not the province of Miss Hart. A Band-Aid is only of limited effectiveness against

a stomach wound caused by a six-inch switchblade.

"What is it you need?" he asked, settling onto the lumpy cot and lighting his long-overdue cigarette. "Medical advice?"

"I could give you that. I could tell you to stop smoking so much." She smiled and tossed her head into a gesture he liked. "No, I want you to talk to Sammy Rozzo. I think he's gotten one of the girls in trouble."

"Great! Which one?"

"Barbara Alden. She's a senior in Sammy's home room. She's home sick today, but she told me Friday afternoon that she's pregnant."

"Did she accuse Sammy?"

"No, not directly. But I've been doing a little investigating over the weekend. She's dated Sammy, and with his reputation he seems the most likely one."

"His reputation involves picking fights with black students, not seducing girls."

Shirley shrugged her shoulders. "Maybe there's not so much difference. Maybe he's just trying to prove himself."

"So I get the job of talking to him."

She gave a long sigh and stood up. "Who else should I get? Maybe Mr. Fraim? He'd call Sammy up to his office and they'd be at each other's throats. This has to be handled right. We have no evidence against the boy."

"Does anybody else know?"

"I think she told Claude Jackson."

"Jackson!" The sight of a young girl confessing her sins to the English teacher was more than Stannet could swallow. "Why him?"

"The girls think of him as a father. You know, an older man."

"But Jackson!" Stannet guessed he would never understand women, most especially teen-aged girls. "Has he talked to Rozzo?"

"I don't know. I'm only guessing that it *is* Rozzo. I thought maybe you could find out."

"I'll see what I can do," he promised, not holding out much hope. People were always wanting him to talk to people.

He caught up with Sammy Rozzo just after the last class, as the dismissal bell was ringing. "You in a hurry, Sammy?" he asked.

"Yeah. What's it to you?"

"I want to talk to you, that's what."

"You wanna tell me to love the niggers?"

Stannet felt cold fury building within him. "No. It's something else."

"You're a friend of that Hair, aren't you?"

"If you mean LeRoi Fuller, yes I am."

Rozzo was a little guy, one of the shortest in the senior class, but he had muscle and energy.

Sometimes the kids called him the Fighting Fool, because he was always ready with his fists. Lately he'd taken to carrying a knife, like some of the others, and that wasn't good.

"I don't want to talk about Fuller," the kid said.

"It's about Barbara Alden, Sammy."

The boy's face whitened and he seemed truly frightened. "Look, you got the wrong guy on that rap. I already told Jackson..."

"What did you already tell Jackson?"

"Nothin'!"

"All right. I'll ask him myself." He turned toward Claude's classroom just down the hall. The din of exiting students had died to a distant murmur, and they stood in the corridor.

"Don't!" Rozzo pleaded, tugging at his sleeve. "Don't ask him now." Then he was gone, running away, hurrying down the stairs two at a time.

"Crazy kid," Stannet muttered under his breath and tapped gently on Jackson's door as he pushed it open.

At first he failed to see the older man, and he was about to leave when an odd rasping sound reached his ears. He walked toward the front of the room, stopped dead, and almost retched. Claude Jackson was lying doubled up on the floor behind his desk, both arms clutched to his torn,

bleeding stomach.

Stannet hurried forward, almost slipping on the floor slick with blood. He saw the switchblade knife off to one side and didn't touch it. "Claude, Claude— can you hear me?"

The man opened one eye and seemed to nod. He was very close to death.

"Claude, who did this? Was it Sammy Rozzo?"

The balding head shook. Jackson opened his lips and tried to speak.

"Claude..."

"...Hair..." the dying man gasped.

Stannet felt a chill run through him. "Claude, you mean LeRoi?"

"Hair..." he repeated once again. And then he died in Stannet's arms.

Mr. Fraim, the principal, was there when the police arrived, pacing the classroom floor and carefully averting his eyes from the crumpled thing behind the desk. The students were all gone, but Shirley Hart had been summoned from her nurse's office and Bill Lord had still been in his classroom. Together they waited while the police went through their usual motions.

The detective in charge was a man named Gibbon, who looked enough like Mr. Fraim to have been his son. They both carried themselves at all times with an unmistakable air of authority, and their gestures

were those of men who took themselves a bit too seriously.

"You found the body?" the detective asked Stannet.

"Yes. I came in to talk with him and heard a sort of moan."

"Then he was still alive?"

Stannet hesitated. "He died in my arms."

"Was he conscious? Did he say anything?"

Stannet knew that he had to speak, had to reveal the single word with which Jackson had named his murderer. But he couldn't. It was something more than just liking for LeRoi Fuller, despite the boy's misdirected militancy.

It was the certain knowledge that LeRoi's arrest for murdering Claude Jackson would be not an end but a beginning of racial strife at Adams High. Kids like Sammy Rozzo were only waiting for an excuse. He didn't want to give them one.

"No," Stannet answered. "He said nothing."

"What about the knife?" the detective, Gibbon, asked. "Anybody recognize it?"

Bill Lord cleared his throat. He was pale and obviously upset by the killing. "It belonged to one of the kids. Claude took it off of him a month ago, and kept it locked in his desk."

"What kid?"

"I think it was Fuller—LeRoi Fuller. But I'm not sure. He told me about it after it happened."

I remember the design on the handle."

Had LeRoi come to claim his knife? Is that how it happened? Stannet felt a shudder run through his body.

The detective stared out the window at the nearly deserted parking lot. "All right," he said. "We'll pick up this Fuller kid for questioning. And tomorrow we'll be here to question the rest of the students. This is one killing I'm going to wind up fast, if I have to lock up the school."

The following morning was dreary with rain, and on the way to the school Stannet came upon a group of boys tussling on the damp pavement about a block from the parking lot. They scattered when he stopped the car but he recognized Rozzo and some of his friends. Behind them they left a single boy sprawled in a puddle, bleeding from the nose and mouth. It was Creed, LeRoi's friend.

"What happened, Creed?" Stannet asked, wiping away the worst of the blood with his handkerchief.

"I don't know. They pounced on me, Rozzo and his gang. They said we killed Mr. Jackson. I don't know anything about it."

"I know you don't," Stannet said. "Can you stand up?"

"Sure. They didn't hurt me bad." Then he added, "Don't tell Hair, huh? He'd go after them with his knife."

Stannet felt a shiver at the nickname. "I won't tell him." He put Creed in his car and drove them the rest of the way to school. In the parking lot he asked, "Do you think LeRoi—Hair—might be mixed up in Mr. Jackson's killing? They didn't like each other."

Creed considered the possibility. "No, Hair wouldn't do anything like that. Not to a teacher." But he didn't seem entirely convinced.

Shirley met Stannet at his classroom with the latest news. "They had LeRoi down at the Police Headquarters all night, questioning him because it was his knife. They're bringing him here this morning, but I don't think they can hold him."

Stannet began straightening his desk "I hope not. Things are getting bad." He told her about Creed's beating by Rozzo's gang.

"Who do you think killed him, Jim?" she asked.

"I wish I knew." Then he remembered something. "I tried talking to Rozzo about the Alden girl, but he denied everything. He said Jackson already asked him about it."

"Well," Shirley sighed, "Claude isn't around to say anything now."

"No, but the girl is. did she come to school today?"

"I'll check her home room," Shirley said and went off into

the crowded hall. It was almost time for the first class to begin, but everywhere there were little groups of girls or boys gathered, talking in subdued yet excited tones about the murder of Claude Jackson. Stannet wondered who they were blaming for it. Certainly they must know the police were questioning LeRoi.

He caught sight of Sammy Rozzo standing at the edge of one group and tapped him on the shoulder. "Sammy, I want a word with you."

"What now?"

"Why were you beating up Creed this morning?"

"Because he's a friend of Hair Fuller's and Fuller killed Mr. Jackson."

"You don't know that."

"It was his knife. Everybody says so."

"The knife had been in Jackson's desk for months."

"Who else would have killed him?" Sammy challenged.

"You, for one. You ran away yesterday just before I found the body."

Sammy Rozzo looked away. He glanced around to make sure none of the others in the crowded corridor were within earshot. "That was on account of Barbara. You were asking me about her, and Jackson had just been asking me, too. I thought you were ganging up to frame me for being the kid's father."

"And you're not?"

"We necked in my car. Nothing else."

"All right," Stannet said.

"Go after Hair and Creed. They're the ones who killed Jackson." Rozzo moved away, down the hall, turning at the last minute to add, "If the cops don't get them, we will. We don't want them at Adams—none of them!"

Yes, Stannet said silently to himself. Hair—LeRoi Fuller, murderer. The police already suspected him. Stannet's evidence of the dying man's last word would be enough to arrest him, enough to send him to prison for the rest of his life.

Mr. Fraim came down the stairs from the top floor. "We've been looking for you, Stannet," he said. "The police are questioning the Fuller boy in my office and they want to see you."

"Thanks."

As he was entering the principal's office, Shirley waved from her nurse's room across the hall. "Barbara's still sick," she told him.

"Get her address. I might want to drive over there."

Shirley nodded and retreated into her office.

Inside the principal's room, Detective Gibbon stood towering over LeRoi Fuller. The black youth was huddled in a wooden armchair, and seemed somehow to have shrunk since the previous day.

Perhaps murder did that to you, Stannet thought. Until that moment he had imagined himself to be protecting Fuller. Now seeing him, he realized it was the others he was protecting—the school, and the other innocent blacks like Creed.

Gibbon turned to Stannet, his face hard and unsmiling. "I understood there'd been trouble between the dead man and LeRoi here. That correct?"

Stanet hesitated, wondering how much they knew. A second detective lounged behind Fraim's desk, making occasional notes. They seemed somehow unreal, dreamlike, and he wondered if the police always seemed this way. "There was some trouble in class yesterday morning. You probably know more about it than I do."

Gibbon nodded. "Did LeRoi tell you he was going to kill Jackson?"

"No. Of course not." He drew a breath and added, "Could I speak to the boy alone for a few minutes?"

"What for?"

"Perhaps I can help get to the bottom of this."

Gibbon and the other detective exchanged glances. "All right," Gibbon answered finally agreed. "But no funny stuff. We'll be just outside."

Stannet waited until the door

closed and then went over to LeRoi's chair. The boy seemed almost in shock, and he turned pleading eyes toward Stannet. "I didn't kill him. Honest!"

Stannet glanced around the room, assuring himself that they had left no sort of listening device. Then he said, very softly, "Listen to me, LeRoi. I'm your friend but you have to tell me the truth. Before he died Mr. Jackson told me that you did it."

"No!"

"That's what he said."

LeRoi Fuller seemed truly shocked. His white eyeballs were wide with fright. "He hated me that much? He hated me enough to frame me with his dying breath!"

"I don't think Jackson would have done that. LeRoi."

"You want me to say I killed him!"

"I want you to tell the truth. Tell the police the truth."

"Man, if they try to hang this on me, the blood's really goin' to flow in this place!" But despite his words, Stannet could see the youth was frightened.

"If you didn't kill him, who did?"

"Maybe he was cleaning his fingernails and the knife slipped."

Stannet sighed and gave up. LeRoi was not about to admit to anything. He opened the door and motioned for the detectives to take over. "Sorry I couldn't help," he said.

Gibbon hung back to speak with him in the hall. "That kid did it. I'd stake my badge on it. But unless we come up with more evidence, we'll have to let him go."

"What evidence do you have now?"

"They argued in class yesterday morning. It was the kid's knife that did the job. And he could have slipped into the class after the final bell."

"Anybody could have slipped into the class after the final bell. And most would be a lot less noticeable than Fuller. You might speak to a boy named Sammy Rozzo. He admits talking to Jackson yesterday afternoon."

Stannet went across the hall to Shirley's office, but it was empty. Then he hurried downstairs to his waiting history class. It would not be a day for much studying or learning, but he at least had to go through the motions.

By noon, with boys and girls cutting classes to discuss the killing, and tensions running high as the news of Creed's beating spread through the school, Mr. Fraim decided to cancel the afternoon classes. The police were still questioning boys in his office, and Stannet noticed with satisfaction that Rozzo had been called in.

He saw Creed in the parking lot, wearing a white Band-Aid that stood out like a flag against the

brown skin of his face. "Just a minute, Creed. I want to ask you something."

"What's that, Mr. Stannet?"

"You always drive to school. How come you were walking this morning when Rozzo and his gang jumped you?"

"My car had a flat tire and there was no time to change it."

"All right," Stannet said, accepting that. He didn't really know why he had asked the question in the first place. He was searching for something when there was nothing to find.

He left Creed and went over to his own car, but before he could get in, Shirley Hart came running out the side door of the school. "Could you give me a ride downtown?" she asked. "If you're going that way?"

"Sure. My afternoon is suddenly free." He edged the car into the street and turned left. "Did the police question you?"

"Briefly. I had nothing to offer. How about you?"

He lit a cigarette and debated how much to tell her. Finally he said, "I haven't really talked to them yet. They seem convinced that LeRoi did it."

"What do you think?" she asked.

"I don't know. I guess I'm thinking more of the community good, the school's good, than I am of a single murderer. If LeRoi is charged with the killing, is it going to set off more trouble

between blacks and whites? And if it does, would it perhaps have been better if he went unpunished?"

Shirley turned to face him in the seat. "You mean you think Jackson's killer should go free in the name of racial peace?"

"I don't know. I'm just wondering."

"What kind of a society would we have if crime went unpunished? You've got your troubles already, between Rozzo and Creed, and those aren't going to get better if LeRoi is freed."

"No," he agreed.

"What about Barbara Alden? Are you going to see her?"

"Yes but it might look odd if I went there alone. Could you come along?"

She hesitated. "I've got some shopping to do for school. Unless you can wait till tonight..."

"It might be better if I went during the day. Never mind, maybe I can catch Bill back at school and take him with me."

"I don't think the poor girl's going to do much talking about her sex life to a couple of male teachers."

He dropped her at a downtown corner and headed back toward the high school. Bill's car was still in the lot, and Stannet found him in the cafeteria, alone with a half-finished cup of coffee.

"Bill, want to take a run out with me while I talk to the Alden girl?"

Bill Lord poured some more cream into his cup. "What for? Playing truant officer now?"

"She talked with Jackson before he was killed. There might be some sort of angle to it."

Bill smiled his best bachelor grin. His divorce was not yet final, but he was dressing and acting these days as if he had never been married. "That old guy was probably getting fresh with her. If it's true she's pregnant, he probably figured she was an easy mark."

"You've heard she's pregnant?"

"It's all over the school. That's why she stayed home the last two days."

Stannet sighed. "I'm always the last to hear anything. But I think you're being a bit hard on Jackson. He wasn't any dirty old man."

Bill Lord shrugged. "Let's go out and talk to the Alden girl."

She lived in a better section of the city, about a mile from Adam's High. Her house was green and white, and a large English sheep dog was playing in the front yard. It seemed like a peaceful sort of place.

A gray-haired woman in a print dress answered the door. "I'm Barbara's mother," she said. "She hasn't been feeling well."

"We're a couple of her teachers

from Adams," Stannet explained. "I'm wondering if we could see her for a few minutes."

"Well...she's not in bed. I suppose it would be all right."

Barbara Alden was a pretty girl, tall and shapely and quite mature for 18. She greeted them in the living room and seemed not at all surprised to see them. "It was awful about Mr. Jackson," she said. "I cried when I heard it on TV."

Stannet sat on the couch opposite her and Bill Lord took a chair. "I understand you had talked with him last week."

"Last week?"

"Sometime recently."

"I talked to him often. He was my friend." She was frowning now, perhaps beginning to realize the reason for their visit.

"Barbara, you have to realize that we're here as your friends. We're trying to get to the bottom of Mr. Jackson's killing, and we think you might be able to help."

"In what way?"

Stannet pursed his lips, trying to find just the right words. Finally he blurted, "Did you tell Jackson to speak with Sammy Rozzo about any matter?"

"Sammy? Of course not! Why...?" And then she knew. Her hand went to her mouth and she looked from Stannet to Lord and back again. "All right," she said. "I'm pregnant! Is that what you came here for? Is that..." And she burst into tears.

Her mother appeared in the doorway, and Stannet wondered how much she already knew, how much she might have heard. "Just one more question," he said. "Did you tell Jackson who the father was?"

"No...no. Go away!"

Stannet and Lord left. Outside, pausing by the car, Lord asked, "If it wasn't Rozzo, do you think it could have been one of the black students?"

Stannet shook his head. "I certainly hope not. We've got enough trouble already."

He dropped Lord back at the school parking lot and drove on home to his apartment. It was nearly five when the phone rang and Shirley Hart's excited voice came over the line.

"Jim, can you get down to the school right away? The police released LeRoi and now a gang of white boys have gone after him. They've got him trapped here."

"I'll be right there. Where are the cops?"

"They left. I almost think they wanted this to happen."

Stannet slammed down the phone and ran to his car. He knew he would have to tell the truth to Gibbon now. Fuller was safer in jail than at the hands of those kids, and the racial clash he'd been trying to avoid was coming anyway.

As Stannet pulled into the school parking lot, Detective

Gibbon's police car came in fast behind him. "What's up?" he shouted. "We had a call..."

"Come on. Rozzo's gang is after Fuller!"

They ran through the deserted halls, with Stannet in the lead and a uniformed policeman bringing up the rear. There were noise and shouting coming from the direction of the gymnasium, and Stannet hesitated only a moment before plunging ahead. Shirley was at the door, her dress torn at one shoulder.

"I tried to stop then," she gasped. She was crying.

Rozzo and the others were in the center of the gym. Some of them had knives. A white boy and two black youths were sprawled wounded on the polished hardwood of the basketball court.

"Satisfied now?" Stannet spat at the detective.

Gibbon fired one shot into the air and the turmoil died a bit. The crowd of boys parted slightly, until they could see Rozzo and Fuller at the very center, facing each other with knives drawn. Both were bleeding from cuts about the face and body.

"All right," Gibbon barked. "The fun's over. Throw down those knives!"

They clattered reluctantly to the floor and both boys stood very still, facing the drawn gun. Stannet looked around for Shirley and saw her at the telephone. She was calling an ambulance for

the wounded ones. Stannet went over to the nearest boy. It was Creed, crumpled again as he had been that morning. This time he looked bad.

"I have to talk to you," Stannet told Gibbon. "There's something about the killing of Jackson that I didn't tell you before."

"You picked a great time to change your mind!"

"I thought keeping quiet would insure some sort of racial peace. I should have known better."

The policeman was separating the warring boys into groups. Gibbon put away his gun and said "Yes, you should have."

"When I found Claude Jackson dying on the floor, he said something. Just one word, but enough to identify his murderer. It told me who came in after his class and..."

Stannet stopped suddenly.

He had been a fool. He'd completely overlooked a fact that changed everything.

"Go on," Gibbon urged. "Who did he say killed him? You better talk now or you're in big trouble, mister!"

Stannet turned where Shirley still stood by the phone. "Call Barbara Alden's home! Right away!"

Shirley obeyed without question. She had recognized the urgency in his voice. A few moments later she turned from the phone, a frown on her face.

"Her mother says she's gone off for a ride. With one of the teachers who came to see her this afternoon."

Stannet cursed softly, then turned back to Gibbon. "You'd better put out a pickup order for Bill Lord's car, and pray that we're not too late."

A half-hour later, as the last of the wounded were being cared for, Gibbon came back to Stannet and Shirley. "We were lucky. The road patrol picked him up on the way out of town."

"Is Barbara all right?"

"She seems to be, except for crying a lot. Said he was kidnapping her."

Stannet nodded. "He must have planned either to kill her or run off with her. Maybe he didn't know himself."

"Bill Lord?" Shirley couldn't understand.

Stannet nodded. "Bill Lord, the ladies' man. The one the girls all went for. He got Barbara pregnant, and she must have told Claude Jackson enough so that he guessed the truth. When he accused Lord of it yesterday, they fought and Lord stabbed him with that knife from Jackson's desk."

"Are you guessing?" Gibbon wanted to know.

"About the motive, but not about Lord being the killer. Jackson's dying word was *Hair*, or at least it sounded like that. *Hair* was a nickname for LeRoi

Fuller, so I jumped to the wrong conclusion. I should have known Jackson wouldn't have used a new nickname hardly anyone knew. He certainly couldn't know that I knew it, he might not have known it himself. He always called Fuller *LeRoi*, and that's the name he would have used in his dying breath to identify him."

"But he said *Hair*?" Gibbon pressed.

"He said *Herr*, the German word for *Lord*. I'd forgotten that he just finished his German class. In that moment of death, he was thinking in German, and he said his killer's name in German."

"Bill Lord." Shirley still couldn't believe it. "Will he confess now?"

"I wouldn't be surprised," Stannet said. "It sounds as if Barbara's ready to talk, and once that story's out, the killing should be easy to pin on him. He might have admitted it to her if he was taking her with him."

She sighed, looking around at the deserted gym. Gibbon had left with Rozzo and the police officer had Fuller in tow. "What now, Jim?"

"I don't know. Let's try the hospital and see how Creed is. Then we'd better go down to Headquarters and see about Fuller and Rozzo. It's going to be a long night, but somebody has to look after those kids."

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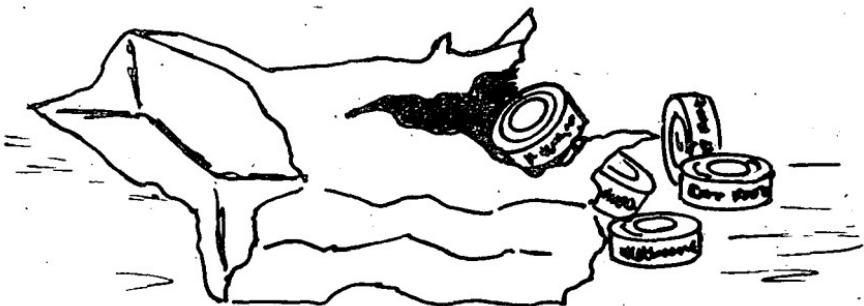
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Little Birds



by KENNETH MOORE

Few Muggers' Victims Get a Chance to Confront Their Attackers—Fewer Still Have a Chance to Even the Score.

SHE HAD BEEN WARNED that it was dangerous to be on the street after dark, but for most of her 66 years, Mrs. Ella Ambrose had been a creature of habit. So, on this hot, muggy August evening, she was making her way home

from an all-night grocery.

Arthritis had long ago crippled one leg, tying her to the dependency of a cane, and as she walked along the litter-strewn pavement, carefully stepping over the cracks in the sidewalk, she balanced a

small grocery bag against the weight and drag of the bad leg.

A city bus roared past and came to an abrupt halt at the corner with a pneumatic hiss of brakes. Two youths in their late teens got off. Then the bus, gears grinding, exhaust belching diesel smoke, roared away, leaving Mrs. Ambrose alone on the street with the two teens.

The two teens glanced nervously up and down the street. One of them began kicking a discarded beer can along the gutter. The other took a package of cigarettes from his pocket, struck a match and cupped his hands as he brought the light up to the cigarette dangling between his lips. Mrs. Ambrose saw the arrogant smile on his face.

The cats were on the street.

Although the boys looked only about 17, both were over six feet tall and heavyset. Both were dressed in blue jeans, tennis shoes, cotton shirts and yellow-and-black basketball jackets.

Mrs. Ambrose's first thought was to turn and retrace her steps. But to do so would only be an admission of fear. So, eyes straight ahead, she walked on.

As she came abreast of the two, the one with the cigarette nodded. "Evening, grandma."

There was no friendliness in his voice.

Then Mrs. Ambrose was past them, stepping up her pace as

much as her bad leg would allow. She had two blocks to go before reaching the senior citizens' apartment complex. But somehow she knew she would never make it.

Behind her there was the click of heels on the pavement and she knew they were following her.

The cats.

That was what the policeman had called them. After the attacks began on the elderly in the neighborhood, the policeman had met with the residents of the senior citizens' complex to urge them to move. "It's not safe here," he told them. "The neighborhood has turned into a battleground and the young toughs have found new victims in you senior citizens. You're like little birds among the cats."

In the last four months, there had been over 30 attacks on the elderly in the neighborhood by the street toughs. Muggings, robberies, beatings, and even death.

Mrs. Ambrose had seen some of the victims, with their cracked arms, legs and ribs, their broken noses, their smashed faces, their bandaged heads.

For the elderly, there were no more walks in the evening in this neighborhood. The park had turned into a war zone and fear and uncertainty lay around every corner.

The elderly were, in truth, little birds among the cats.

As she came abreast of the mouth of the alley, Mrs. Ambrose suddenly saw a flash of yellow

from a basketball jacket, and then the arm was around her throat, cutting off her breath. There was a loud click as the knife blade flipped out. The blade glinted brightly in the pale glow of a street light.

"Make one sound, grandma, and I'll cut your heart out," the boy whispered into her ear.

"Get her in the alley, Jute," the other boy said. "Quick — before someone comes along."

"Ain't nobody going to come along," Jute said, as he dragged Mrs. Ambrose into the darkness of the alley.

Halfway down the alley, Jute released his grasp on Mrs. Ambrose's throat and threw her to the alley floor. The other youth already had Mrs. Ambrose's wallet out of her purse and was rifling it.

"Two bucks," he grunted, holding up two crumpled bills. "Two lousy bucks and a few cents in change."

"Don't sweat it, Frankie," Jute said. "She's got some money somewhere. Go through the purse."

Frankie pawed through the purse, dumped the contents out onto the pavement, then ripped out the lining.

"Nothing," he said. "Just some papers and a couple of old photographs."

Jute prodded Mrs. Ambrose with the toe of his boot. "Okay, grandma, where have you got the money hidden?"

"That — that's all I have," Mrs. Ambrose said thickly. Her throat was raw where Jute had grabbed her, and breathing was difficult.

"What's in the paper bag?" Frankie said.

Jute tore open the bag. "Just a couple of cans of cat food."

"Damn!" Frankie said. "All that work and all we get is two lousy bucks and a couple of cans of cat food."

"Go through the lining of her coat," Jute ordered. "These old ladies always have money hidden away in their clothes."

Frankie pulled Mrs. Ambrose to her feet, stripped off the coat. He slammed her against the alley wall. She hung there a moment, then slid slowly to the pavement.

Frankie chuckled. "These old timers really get me," he said. "It's the middle of August and 100 degrees in the shade and they wear heavy coats."

"Those old bones get cold," Jute said. "And they also get broken if there ain't any money there."

There was the sound of cloth tearing as Frankie ripped the coat apart. Mrs. Ambrose's body was shaking almost uncontrollably now, and she tried to crawl away from the two. Jute put a booted foot on her back, pushed her to the pavement.

"Don't be in such a hurry to go grandma. We ain't through with you yet."

"There is no way you can fight them," the policeman had warned. "If we're lucky enough to arrest any of them after an attack or robbery, they go to court and get nothing worse than a slapped wrist. Then they're back on the street again.

"The only way to survive is to take a few precautions. Get elaborate lock systems for your apartments and always travel in groups if possible. And *never* go out on the streets after dark. The cats are out there, waiting for you.

Mrs. Ambrose realized now she should have waited until morning to go to the store. But the attacks, the muggings, the robberies were things that always happened to someone else. And what harm could there be in a quick trip to the store?

Frankie threw the shredded coat back at Mrs. Ambrose. "Nothing," he said. "Not a cent."

Jute backhanded Mrs. Ambrose across the mouth. "Okay, grandma, we know you've got some money. You just cashed that Social Security check a few days ago. Where's the money?"

"Two dollars," Mrs. Ambrose said through bloody lips. "That—that's all I have."

Jute picked up Mrs. Ambrose's fallen cane, swung it back and forth, the handle looking like the end of a club as it cut the air. "Okay, grandma, if you don't tell us where the money is, I'll take it out of your skin."

"Come on, Jute," Frankie said. "Let's get out of here."

Jute chuckled. "If we don't get any money from grandma, we might as well have a little fun with her."

He raised the cane. Mrs. Ambrose put up her arms to ward off the blow. "No, please — don't hurt me . . ."

The first blow fell as Mrs. Ambrose began screaming in pain and terror.

Jute continued swinging the cane long after Mrs. Ambrose lost consciousness.

The cop's name was Ben Fraley. He was a detective-sergeant with 15 years on the department, but he still shuddered when he had to investigate one of these attacks on the elderly.

"Is Mrs. Ambrose able to talk?" Fraley asked the doctor.

The doctor nodded. "But only for a few minutes. She was pretty badly beaten."

"How badly is she hurt?" Fraley asked.

"She's got a couple of cracked ribs, a broken nose, a fractured arm and multiple lacerations and contusions."

The detective checked his watch. It was a little after midnight. "I'd like to talk to her as soon as possible. The sooner we get this over with, the better."

"They got two dollars from her," the doctor said. "Two dollars, and they practically killed her."

"The ambulance crew said they found a bag with a couple of cans of cat food beside her in the alley," Fraley said. "She shouldn't have been out at night buying cat food. The cat could have waited until morning to be fed."

"Mrs. Ambrose doesn't own a cat," the doctor said dryly.

Fraley had heard that many of the elderly, forced by a lack of money, supplemented their diets with pet food. But he had never actually believed it. Until now. He suddenly felt as though he were a thousand years old.

Ten minutes later, Fraley stood at the foot of Mrs. Ambrose's hospital bed. The detective's stomach felt queasy as he stared at the old woman, who was wrapped almost like a mummy in bandages. The old woman stared back at him with sad eyes.

Something seemed to fall away in Fraley's stomach and he swallowed hard to keep it from rising in his throat. "Do you feel well enough to look at a couple of suspects, Mrs. Ambrose?" His voice was shaky.

"Suspects?" Mrs. Ambrose mumbled through broken lips. "You caught them?"

"We caught them," Fraley said. "In fact, they've already confessed to robbing and beating you. All you have to do is identify them and we'll have a case."

"Confessed?" Mrs. Ambrose had a puzzled expression on her

face. "I don't understand."

"Two street toughs held up a druggist about six blocks from where you were attacked," Fraley said, reading from a well-thumbed notebook. "They shot and killed the druggist. We got a good description of the two killers from a passerby, and the description fits Jute and Frankie to a 'T'. We picked them up less than two blocks from the drug store.

"However, Jute and Frankie say they have an alibi for the time the druggist was killed. They claim they were beating and robbing you at the time. I guess they figure an assault and robbery charge is better than a murder rap."

Fraley put away his notebook. "We've got them outside now. All you have to do is identify them and they're off the hook for murder."

Fraley opened the door to the hallway. "Bring 'em in, officer."

The uniformed patrolman ushered Jute and Frankie into the hospital room. They were handcuffed, but they still wore their arrogant look.

"Hi, grandma," Jute said. "Remember us?"

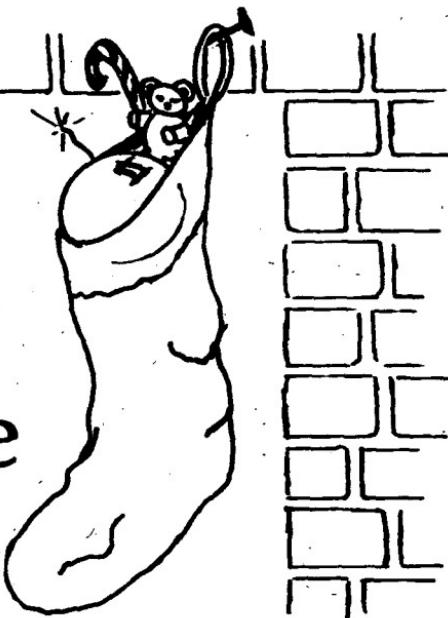
Mrs. Ambrose stared at the two. Two hours before they would have killed her with all the conscience of someone stepping on a bug. And now they wanted her to save them.

"I'm sorry, sergeant," she said softly, "but I've never seen these two boys before."

Jute started screaming . . .

By the Chimney with Care

by NICK O'DONOHOE



Hartley and Phillips Have Their Hands Full at Yuletide with a Gaggle of Visiting Kids and a Vengeful Ex-Con Determined to Blast Them to Hell!

IT WAS THE ONE day a week I could sleep late—so naturally the phone rang. I muttered, “Go away,” and tried to sleep through it. Nobody would keep trying me forever.

But the phone kept ringing, and suddenly there was a furry black tail swishing back and forth in my face. I sat up and dumped the cat off my chest. “Thanks a bunch, Marlowe.” He sneered. “You my answering service these days?” He stood on the bed, lashing his tail and waiting.

I gave in and picked up the

phone. “Cartley and Phillips, home office. And Phillips speaking.”

“Nathan.” It was Cartley’s voice, as rasping as I’ve ever heard it. “Nate, I’ve got my living room blocked off, and I want to keep the kids out. It’s that time of the year, you know.” He was trying to sound light-hearted; I’ve heard lighter pile-drivers.

I’m slow-at that hour. “And you want help in the livingroom, right? Ho-ho-ho! But it’s a whole week before—”

“Can’t say, Nate, there’s an

extension phone," he broke in sharply.

A high-pitched giggle came on the line. "Hi, Uncle Roy! Are you talking to Nathan?"

I got the idea, finally. "Who is this? Amy? Paul?" After two outraged denials I had it easy. "Aw, I knew it was you, Howie. Listen, I'll be right over. Who said you could listen in on us?"

"I can be a detective, too."

I tried to sound injured. "Why are you bugging me, Howie? I haven't done anything wrong."

"Not yet." He was triumphantly confident. I was going to be a crook, and the kids would catch me. That always happened when they visited Uncle Roy before Christmas. I loved it.

I said goodbye and stumbled into the bathroom, where I nearly brushed my teeth with Ben-Gay. After that I drove over. By the time I hit the boulevard around Lake of the Isles I was awake enough to wonder why Roy had wanted me over right now.

At the front door I was surrounded; I knelt to hug Amy and Paul, then twisted my right arm forward just enough to shake hands with Howie. "Hi, Howie. Old enough to know better, yet?"

"Getting older," he said, trying to look world-weary and not doing badly—for a ten-year-old. "Have you been behaving yourself, Nathan?" he added.

I narrowed my eyes and curled my lip. "That's for me to know,

and you to find out." I wasn't sure what kind of a bad guy to be just yet. "Only person I'll talk to here is my accomplice." I stood up and called Roy, "Merry Christmas, almost. We have plans to make in the living room?"

"Sure." I looked at him, and suddenly knew we weren't going to wrap presents. He edged through the living-room door, blocking the view with his body; I did the same. A haze of cigarette smoke drifted out over our heads. As I came through, Roy glanced behind me nervously. I shut the door quickly, braced it with the doorstop and turned around.

I spun back around, hung my coat over the doorknob to block the keyhole, then walked quickly over and shut the front curtains. Roy sat down in one of the chairs.

"Good thinking," he said, and rubbed his face. "God, I haven't been able to think of a *thing*."

"Who is he?" I said. It was all I could think of to say.

"What do you mean, 'who is he?'" Roy said irritably. "Don't look at his chest, concentrate on his face."

It was hard. My eyes were drawn to the knife-wound. He was up against the chimney, his knees folded under him, his body somehow suspended upright. The flesh on his face was sagging. It made him look weary beyond belief.

Then I pictured the same face, slouched forward in the back seat of a squad car. "Gam Gillis!"

"Right."

"What's he doing *here*? You don't even *have* a safe."

Roy gestured at the fireplace below the body. "He's hung on the damper. Look at his jacket. The collar must be hooked in back, and all his weight's on it. When the collarbutton pops off, down he'll go." Cartley felt his pockets methodically, then drummed his fingers against one knee in frustration. "Nate, you got any cigarettes?"

"Sorry." For the first time in my life, I wished I had smoked. Roy was a wreck. "Want me to go for some?"

"No, I want you to take the kids somewhere while the police are here."

"When are they coming?" He suddenly looked stricken.

"Jesus, Roy, you forgot to call?"

He wiped at his face, nodding. I picked up the phone and began dialing. "By the way, who do you think put Gillis here?"

"Who else? Petlovich."

"Oh," I said—but it was a big "oh"; Roy and I had gotten Gillis to turn state's evidence on Petlovich two years ago, over a jewelry theft we'd been checking out for an insurance company. "You think Petlovich left Gillis as a message. In other words—" I stopped. I didn't want any other words.

Just then the police answered. "Give me Lieutenant Pederson,

please." While I waited, I asked Roy, "You gonna tell your wife?"

"Hell, no! Her mother sprained her ankle at just the right time. Maybe this'll be over before she's back."

"What about the kids—can you send them someplace?"

"Not a chance. My brother goes wilderness camping in California. The National Guard couldn't get hold of him." He felt his pockets again, automatically.

Just then the phone said, "Homicide. Pederson here."

"Good to hear you. This is Nathan Phillips. How's Minneapolis's second finest?"

He answered levelly, "Phillips, any time you give me your full name and say it's good to hear me, something's up. *What's up?*"

I must have been as rattled as Roy. "There's been a murder at Roy's house. James Gillis, an ex-con; you can look up his connection with us. Oh, and bring a pack of cigarettes?"

Roy called out "Camels," just as Pederson said, "Camels, right? Sure thing. Wait a minute, aren't Jack's kids visiting Roy now?"

"Yeah. Can you hurry?"

"You bet." He added too casually, "Did Roy do it?"

"I..." I turned to look at Roy "Uh, Roy's okay," I said carefully. "No. No, of course not. You'll see." I hoped he would. "See you when you get here."

I hung up.

"Thanks, Nate. Now let's go collect the kids." He stared at the fireplace. So had I, on and off. We were both watching the collar-button hole stretching.

"Waiting for the other shoe to drop," I said. "When the bough breaks—"

"Nathan, for Christ's sake!" He glared, and I kicked myself. Seeing a murder is different when

"Sorry." I edged out the door, and the kids jumped up. I said to them, "There wasn't anything in there at all. He just wanted a quiet place to yell at me for not taking you guys anywhere. So we're going sledding, right now."

They scrambled for their coats. Los Angeles kids don't get much chance for winter sports. Afterwards, I'd take them to my apartment for lunch; and call Roy from there.

Howie turned halfway out of his coat as he put it on. I opened my mouth and Cartley said, "Sure he will."

Howie grinned and said, "you gonna crash sleds with me?"

"Nathan will love that." It was the closest to a grin Cartley had managed all morning.

"Yeah," I said, pulling on my stocking cap, "Nathan loves bruises." We went.

Incidentally, Nathan got creamed.

THE KIDS LOVED my apartment. I hadn't put a thing away in weeks. All kinds of fragile,

fascinating oddities were lying about within reach. I said, "Don't break anything I haven't already broken," and went to the kitchen to heat soup and make sandwiches. While I was out there, I heard a giggling and the sound of a cat losing hold of the upholsterty.

Before I could get to the door, Amy came into the kitchen, hugging Marlowe and holding him up by his armpits. Marlowe was hanging limp, purring frantically. He raised his pleading eyes to me. His claws, bless his heart, were in.

"Cats break, too, Amy." I took Marlowe out of her arms, putting an arm under his back legs. He let his claws out just enough to show he was unhappy. "He looks like he wants to go out." About as far out as Skylab. "Could you open the door?"

She ran over and reached up to the knob. When the door opened four inches Marlowe streaked out. Good enough. I could go down and let him all the way out later.

Paul peered around the kitchen door, then stepped in. "You done anything against the law yet, Nathan?"

"I'm not telling. What's in your hand?" He opened his first. Clutched in it was a glass cat.

I took it from him, held it up to the light and polished it, then put it back on his palm and played with the tail to make the cat dance. "That's Marlowe's girl

friend. A friend gave her to me and said Marlowe needed a steady girl friend."

Paul examined the statue. "How come she's clear?"

"My friend said Marlowe's girlfriend should be hard to see, so his other girlfriend's wouldn't get jealous."

In came Howie, then, glancing quickly around the kitchen for signs of iniquity. His eyes lit triumphantly on the scotch bottle next to all the dirty dishes.

"So that's what you've been doing, Nathan." He pointed to the bottles, then to me, like the world's smallest prosecuting attorney. "You've been drinking alone!"

Amy scurried to my defense—sort of. She stood on tiptoe, hanging onto the counter-top and peering over it. "No he hasn't," she said primly.

"How do you know, Blondie?" For a ten-year-old, Howie had a hell of a sneer. I quit being that tough at nine.

She smiled triumphantly. "Any-one can tell, smarty. There are two dirty glasses by the bottle, and one of them has lipstick on it.

"Nathan's got a gir-ul, Nathan's got a gir-ul." That was Paul. God, they were cute! Suddenly I wished Roy would hurry up.

I picked up Amy and swung her over the counter. You want to have your soup," I growled, "or shall I cook you up for the rest of us?"

She screamed and laughed, and I put her down. "Soup's ready," I announced. They all ran to the table, which Howie, to my surprise, had set. That's why he hadn't been in the kitchen earlier uncovering my sins.

While I was in the kitchen making more sandwiches, there was a pounding on the door, and a deep, grim voice said deadpan, "Police."

Howie ran to the kitchen and looked at me wide-eyed; I said, "It's no use. Let them in, and I'll give myself up." Howie opened the front door dubiously, and Lieutenant Pederson walked in, grinning, Roy a step behind him.

After "Mr. Pederson" was re-introduced to the kids, and I'd served the sandwiches and the last of the soup, Pederson looked up and said innocently, "Things are kind of slow at the station. How would you like to tour it, and see the jail and the lab?"

They had their coats on before he had even pushed back from the table.

When Roy and I were alone I said, "Now that's above and beyond the call of duty. What gives?"

Roy looked much happier with life. "Jon didn't feel the police investigation would turn anything up very fast, so he offered to baby-sit for a couple of hours while we check out some possibilities."

"Great. Do we have any?"

"Possibilities? Not many. We can't question Petlovich till someone finds out where he is. His parole officer hasn't seen him in a while."

I raised an eyebrow. "Sounds dubious. How long till we can get ahold of him?"

"Maybe this afternoon. We'll be seeing Gillis's woman."

"Long-standing?"

"Same one as when he helped us send up Petlovich. Her name's Mary Jordan. Two shoplifting convictions and a bad-check charge, dropped later. Otherwise, she's clean—not hard to be cleaner than the men she hangs around with. She might know where Petlovich is."

"Fat chance," I said, pulling on my stocking cap. Cartley looked at me oddly.

"You're not going to shave?"

I shrugged. "We need to look tough. I always cut myself."

He shrugged back. Out we went.

GILLIS' APARTMENT was on the east side of 35W, not too far south of downtown. Further down, in the plusher residential areas along Minnehaha Creek, there were sound fences on either side of the highway, painted a tasteful, unobtrusive green. Up here, they wouldn't have put a fence up, and someone would have stolen the paint.

Roy, and I climbed up two flights of bowing, scarred stairs to a splintered door. The hallway

had visible piles of dirt in the corners and along the baseboards. It looked like any other walk-up, only grimier. The baseboards had shrunk away from the linoleum, and I didn't blame them.

Roy pounded on the door. We both had enough sense to stand aside. Inside there was a scuffling, and the volume on TV chortled appreciation.

Roy said with no patience, "Miss Jordan, we're investigators, Cartley and Phillips. We worked with Gam a couple of years back—"

The laughter was cut off and a couple of seconds later the door was jerked open. A black-rooted redhead with booze breath and smeared mascara looked at us. "Come on in. I'd make you some eggs, but I only got fresh ones."

Roy walked in, first looking through the crack between door and wall to see if anyone was waiting. I glanced out the window at the fire escape. Roy said, "I didn't expect you to love us, but I didn't expect you to be drunk in front of the TV today, either." He was red-faced.

As I came in, she walked over to the encrusted sink-and-stove in the room's corner, picked up a half-empty flat pint bottle, and stared at it argumentatively.

"Did you hear what he said?" she demanded of it, swaying. "He thinks I shouldn't drink you." Then she tipped it up and took a long pull. She giggled

as she set it down. She had to be her own laugh-track now.

Cartley looked irritated. He opened his mouth, but I winked at him and he shut up as I said, "Don't listen to him, lady—drink up. Gillis wasn't worth staying dry for—why waste an afternoon crying for a down-and-out stoolie with just enough brains to get killed?"

I ducked, but shouldn't have bothered. The glass went over me by three feet.

"Wait a—" Roy said and stopped as another glass flew by me, low and to the right. Two more tries, and there was nothing within her reach but the bottle. She hefted it, glared at me frustratedly, then took another drink.

Roy sounded like sweet reason itself. "Young Nate here came along with his own ideas, ma'am. I came to see if I could track down who killed Gillis."

She looked at him, startled, and wiped her mouth on the back of her hand. "Petlovich." If she had any doubts, they weren't in her voice. "Nobody else would have killed him. Who would have wanted to?"

"I would," I offered, keeping in character. "You would have, too, if he hadn't been your meal ticket."

She nearly did throw the bottle. "He ain't given me a dime, you lying bastard. I paid for this place and our food and—hell, he ain't

even taken me out for dinner in two or three months. she stopped, probably realizing that he wouldn't, ever again.

Roy said quickly, "All I want is Petlovich's address, Mary. Nothing else. You want him to go up for it, don't you?"

She knotted her hands into spindly, white-knuckled fists. "You bet I do," she pointed at me suddenly, "And I'd send him up, too, if I could!" She ran into the apartment's tiny bathroom and slammed the door. It was loose in the frame; we could hear her weeping.

Roy said quietly, "Maybe it'd be better from here if you waited outside, Nate. Thanks for priming her."

"You're less than welcome." I meant it. "I'm tired of playing the bad guy."

On my way out I stopped and looked at a pair of Polyester trousers with pulled threads poking out of them, draped over a chair. I glanced toward the bathroom door, then checked the trousers-pockets.

No wallet—that had been on the body—but the right front pocket held his check-book. I flipped idly but quickly through the stubs. For a man that lived off his woman, this guy had been living pretty high lately.

He had written three checks to good restaurants, one to a department store and one for a couple of hundred, marked simply

"cash"—all dated within the last three months. He had the deposits recorded in the back. They had been made, one for each check, barely in time and barely enough to cover the amount.

I put the checkbook back. As I did, the bathroom doorknob turned. I gave a quick nod to Roy and edged out to the hall.

Through the door, I could hear him mutter and her snuffle and spit. I shuffled from one foot to the other, idly trying to guess what color the walls had been twenty years ago, I felt like taking a bath.

When Roy came out, he gave me an address in St. Paul, and away he went. I told him about the check-book.

"Oho!" he said. "So she was lying about the money."

"Or else she didn't know about it."

Roy looked dubious. "How much were those restaurant checks again?" I told him. "It's an odd amount, so you can bet he wasn't cashing a check. Could you eat your way through \$45.38 worth of food at any of those places? Never mind—you probably could.

"Yeah, but I wouldn't—not alone. Or with a friend, either, unless I was in the money or thought I was going to be."

"I know." He grabbed the armrest as I took a right turn. "She found that address pretty fast, too. Well, we're headed

to see Petlovich, aren't we?" Roy was cheerful again. On the way to Saint Paul, he made three rotten jokes and yelled at my driving at every other turn. It wasn't fair. I had signaled at most of those turns, or meant to.

Saint Paul was a bust, a waste of time. We came up the stairs, we knocked from beside the door, we heard a scrambling in the room, we stood back. A slug ripped through the door; Roy let go of the knob and we both flattened against the wall. After a minute of silence, Cartley threw the door open and we charged in, heads down and guns up.

There was nothing much in the room—a battered suit-case, a sack of groceries, a newspaper and some mail. The window was open, and the shade, jerked down roller and all, hung half in the window and half out. I looked out. Ten feet below the window were the deep tracks where he had hit, and the footprints of a man sprinting away.

We turned back to the table. Cartley went for the mail and I checked the newspaper. He tossed the letters down in disgust, "Bills!"

"No Christmas cards? Funny, I thought he was on my list."

"I haven't gotten one from you either." Cartley stared at the mail again. "If Petlovich has money, he isn't paying off debts with it. I wonder why he waited

so long to leave town. If the cops didn't come for him, a collection agency would."

"I don't know about his bills, but I know why he didn't blow town till now." I showed Roy the Minneapolis *Star*, afternoon edition. In the lower right-hand corner of the front page was a human-interest story about the body that had been found hung by the chimney in an unnamed Minneapolis home. The article said the police suspected one Willem Petlovich, former second-story man.

Roy stared at it woodenly. "That shouldn't have spooked him. He had to know he'd be a suspect."

"Maybe," I said. "But the paper ties him in explicitly. Maybe he figured he'd have a day or two before anyone knew where to look for him."

"He's that dumb?"

"He's got caught once. By you even."

"By you, too. All right, quit the kidding. He got caught because he was ratted on." We holstered our guns and left.

On the way back, I asked, "Want to report the shooting to Pederson?"

"And catch hell for playing cops without badges or a warrant?" He sighed. "Guess we better. Jon won't like this. He didn't take care of the kids so we could go break laws."

"Yeah. Say, why don't you drop

me off at home? I ought to feed Marlowe, and—"

"Sure. Right *after* we talk to Jon." He considered. "No. I'll wait for you while you feed him now. Nate, I'd really appreciate it if you'd sack out on the couch at my house tonight. Bring your gun."

It made sense. "Uh, yeah. Roy, while you talk to Jon can I make a phone call?"

He grinned then. "Okay, coward. But after you talk to that woman nobody's supposed to know about, you can come in and catch hell like a man."

I ran a stop sign, unintentionally for once. "Damn it, is everyone on my private life? I suppose the kids told you while I was in the kitchen."

He leaned back and hitched at his belt. "If you can't fool visitors, you couldn't fool your partner."

"Yeah?" It wasn't much of a crack, but it was all I had left.

THE NEXT MORNING I opened my eyes and found a pair of cool blue eyes, framed by blonde bangs, not more than six inches from my face. I closed my eyes and tried to think. Wasn't the hair sandier?

Then I remembered where I was and that only made it more confusing. I opened my eyes again and, after a few tries, focussed on the face around the eyes. I pulled the blanket up over my chest, feeling em-

barrassed and then silly about it.

"Oh! H'lo, Amy." She was standing beside the sofa. "Sleep well?" She nodded.

I hadn't. This house had more creaking boards and rattling windows than the House of Usher. "Had breakfast yet?" She shook her head. "What's the matter, don't you talk in the morning?"

She straightened her flannel nightgown and folded her arms self-assuredly. "I'm waiting till the others get up," she said.

Great! I was guilty again. Ah, life as a hardened criminal! I went into the bathroom, brushed my teeth and changed my pajama bottoms for trousers.

I was throwing cold water on my face when I heard a whoop from Howie and a shriek from Paul. I tottered out and collided with Cartley, striding out in his bathrobe to collect the evidence and punish the wicked. He was boiling mad. He looked like a walking bathrobe with a ham roast in it.

In the living room, Amy was standing demurely by the front door while Paul tugged at it. She ran a hand over her blonde hair to make sure she looked tidy and grown-up, then turned to Roy. "We caught Nathan. He's trying to keep us shut in the house, isn't he?"

Roy laughed, tried to unlock the door, then stopped laughing and threw his weight against it. It didn't budge. I was in the

kitchen before he hit it a second time.

I rammed the back door with my shoulder, on the dead run. It jarred my teeth snapped my head back, but the door barely rattled: I tried again. I might as well have hit Mount Rushmore.

I ran back through the sitting room and snatched my gun from under the sofa pillow. I could hear Roy going through closets downstairs; I charged upstairs. I flipped through every wardrobe with my gun muzzle, poked under every bed, even looked in the shower-stall and the clothes-hamper. Amy and Paul, watching from the livingroom, must have loved it.

I met Roy back in the sitting room, at the foot of the stairs. I called out before I came down—when I saw his eyes I was glad I had. He was staring every which way and pacing. His gun shivered in his fist like a live mouse.

I said in my calmest deadpan, "Nobody home, Roy. You should make your visitors sign a guest-book. You get such a lot of them."

He relaxed. "Yeah," he said and coughed. "I'm beginning to think I should sublet this place."

"I—" I stopped as Howie came out of the kitchen and lounged against the doorway.

"Nice try, Nathan," he said, looking sideways at Amy and Paul. He was pale. "Pretty good crime, huh? Lock us in, then finish

us off." He didn't look like he enjoyed playing anymore. "I wouldn't even have guessed, if I hadn't poked around the basement."

"Jesus!" I was closest. I ran to the kitchen and fumbled frantically with the basement doorknob. Roy was right behind me before I got it open.

It was in the corner near the hot-water heater. Not too surprising, since it was right in front of Roy's fuel-oil tank. It was small, shapeless and attached to a clock. Anybody over three who watched television could see it was a bomb.

It didn't look powerful. It didn't have to be, so long as it set off the fuel-oil tank. I picked up a broom and was shoving the bomb along the floor gingerly, away from the tank, as Paul and Amy slipped past Roy and danced around me, chanting, "We caught Nathan!"

Howie looked relieved! I suppose I looked pretty silly, doubled over and poking delicately from a broom's length away at a wad of clay, a battery and an alarm clock whose hands were nearly touching.

"Go back upstairs," I said. Softly. Roy said it louder. They giggled and shook their heads. We couldn't drag them all out. We might not have time, and if they kicked too hard—

I tossed the broom to Roy, saying, "Shove the bomb in the corner," in a conspiratorial tone.

Then I snatched up Amy and continued, "while I kidnap the girl. Ya ha ha."

I tucked her under my arm and dashed up the stairs, with Amy laughing and struggling and Paul and Howie in hot pursuit. As I left I called out, "And set it off with your bowling ball!" I hoped he understood.

I only glanced at the front window. I'd never get the kids out in time if the boys caught up with me and tried to "arrest" me before I could break it open. I ran upstairs, to the kids' bedroom in back; I locked the door for a second while I threw open the door and climbed onto the roof, still carrying Amy. The boys burst in and followed, right on out the window.

We were right over the pile of snow at the end of the driveway. Far below me, through the window, I could hear the muffled grind of a bowling ball rolling slowly across the basement floor; the sound was nearly covered by the hasty slap of flat feet on the basement stairs.

I snarled, "You'll never take us alive," wrapped Amy in my arms and rolled off the roof to land on my back in the snow nine feet below.

The wind was knocked out of me, and I felt a sharp stabbing pain in my right side. Above me, the boys were hesitating at the roof's edge.

As Amy yelled, "Jump! It's

easy," there was a loud boom from the basement, and the chime of broken glass on the other side of the house as Roy leaped through the front window. The boys jumped and sank in the snow almost to their waists.

I rolled Amy off me as Roy came running up, still in his bathrobe, still bleeding from a small cut on his right hand. He felt my side where I was clutching it, said matter-of-factly, "Yep," and slipped his bathrobe off to put under me.

Then he stood there in his pajamas, looking foolish and cold. "I'll get you to a doctor. Thanks Nate." He shuffled, and looked at the kids, dazed. Amy was still unruffled, but her eyes were shining. Howie and Paul were jumping up and down with excitement.

He looked back at me. "Do you feel all excited too, Nate?"

Talking hurt. I felt that I should slip the words out edgeways. "Gee, Uncle Roy, can we do that again?"

He chuckled, but his jaw jumped as he looked at the back door. I rolled my head cautiously and looked myself. There was a two-by-four across it. Screwed into the doorframe at either end; a U-bolt went around the door knob. If that bomb had ignited the fuel oil, we'd never have gotten out in time.

Suddenly Roy was as cool as I've ever seen him. I said,

"Roy"—quietly—but he didn't hear me.

He added, even more quietly, "If it turns out that guy knew the kids were here, I'll make sure he doesn't see the inside of a courtroom myself."

He was shaking, and he wasn't cold, and even in his pajamas he didn't look silly at all.

THE HOSPITAL BED had the usual sheets—snow-white, rigid with starch and smelling the underside of a bandaid. There was a single Christmas-tree ornament hanging from the bedside lamp, and a cardboard Santa lay on the night stand looking round and two-dimensional. Cut-out letters on the mirror read, *Merry Christmas*.

Roy looked at his reflection, rubbing his chin—he hadn't shaved—and said, "You're supposed to take it easy, and this is the easiest I can get for you."

I scratched and winced; I could feel the pain all along my side. "My timing's rotten. Sorry, Roy. You won't even have the bandage on long. You cracked a rib, not broke it."

"If you're not gonna be cheerful, I'm not gonna talk." I leaned back and sulked while he left, whistling.

I settled back into the pillow, wishing I felt like taking it easy. There was a murderer loose who wanted to kill Cartley, one who wasn't losing any sleep over killing a few kids in the process.

I was in the hospital for twenty-four hours and restricted for much longer. And my partner and best friend was thinking seriously about murder. I tried to take it easy, feeling cold-blooded.

Painful as it was, I shifted restlessly and tried to think. The bombing had been disturbing amateurish. The bomb itself had been inefficient and the house-barricade childish. Even the first murder smacked of cheap detective shows. Only the break-in showed any professionalism; the first break-in had all the class of Gillis's and Petlovich's best efforts.

Irrelevently, I wondered what Gam and Mary did with those nights out on the town. It couldn't have been anything much; apparently Mary hadn't enjoyed herself, or else wasn't talking. I pictured a tired thug and a bored woman, eating something Cordon bleu and taking turns reading each other their rights.

I was dozing when the phone rang. I could have ignored it, since Marlowe wasn't on duty, but I remembered where I was and what was going on before it stopped ringing.

"Yeah?"

"Boy!" It was Howie. "You sure took a long time to get to the phone."

"Don't whine. It's a big room. I was clear across it, dusting the grand piano. What's up, Howie?"

"Just wanted to tell you I figured out what you're doing, and why." He sounded half light-hearted, half-scared—strained. I was reminded of Cartly's call the other morning.

I said, "What?" then had a thought. "No I take it back. Howie, Amy and Paul aren't on the extension, are they?" "No."

"But they're in the room behind you."

"Yes." On cue I heard them talking in the background, a long way from the phone.

"Howie," I said cautiously, "You're pretty sure that bomb this morning wasn't anything your uncle and I did, aren't you?"

He let out a quick sigh, then said, "Sure."

"Do the others know?"

"No way." He was very firm, almost military.

"Right. Well, we're not playing, and you know it, so what did you call about?"

He tried to sound. "I'll bet anything Uncle Roy has gone to see some woman that helps you."

"Why?"

"Cause he said he had to see a girl about a restaurant, just after he got a phone call. I thought you'd know about it," he added in real surprise. "I figured it was your girl, helping you."

I was irritated. "Doesn't he know any other girls?"

Howie said self-righteously,

"He's *married*. And if you've got more than one girl, I bet you're in trouble."

"Not if the first one never finds out—oh, wait. Of course. Sure." Funny how things fall together when you're not looking for them. "Howie, thanks for calling. What you just told me was important. But why did you call me? What made it important to you?"

His whisper was moist and breathy; he must have had the mouthpiece right against his lips. "'Cause when Uncle Roy left he took two guns and all kinds of bullets, and I've never seen him do that before."

The sheets weren't just snowy—suddenly they felt like ice. I said "I'll do something about it right now. Howie, nobody ever said you weren't on the ball, and nobody's ever going to."

"Thanks, Nathan," he said seriously, then hung up.

Right after the click I called Pederson. I was lucky enough to find him in.

"What do you want?" he groused. "Phillips, I thought if you took a rest, I'd have one.

"Fat chance. Are you doing anything?"

"Plenty."

'Drop it and pick me up at the hospital. Roy needs someone from Homicide."

"There are other cops besides me, you know." I could hear the *whuff* as he lit up one of his cigars

and pulled at it. "Some of them are even homicide."

"He needs a friend—two of them. He's in trouble, and some rookie with a gun won't get out him out of it."

"Why not?"

"Because his own gun's getting him into it right now."

That was as close as I could come without committing myself.

It worked. There was a moment's silence, then Pederson said roughly, "I don't understand, and I'll be right over. Be downstairs and ready in ten minutes, even if it hurts."

TEN MINUTES LATER he was there, I was ready and God, did it hurt! I gave him the address, and he drove faster than I'd have dared through downtown, even with a siren. We skidded onto Lake Street, wove through traffic till we shot under 35W, then screeched into a right turn we almost skidded out of. I filled him in the whole time, not stopping when I grabbed the dash for support.

He interrupted twice. "How do you know all this?"

"The restaurant bills. The man who kept a woman in that slum didn't show her three good nights on the town."

He grunted, and we went on. A little later he said, "You know, Phillips, I wish you could have done without me. My badge is sticky; it doesn't pull off just

because a friend's involved."

"How do you answer that? "I know. I'm hoping we'll get there before anything too bad happens." He sped up then. I hadn't thought it possible.

We pulled in across the street from the building. Roy's car was nowhere in sight, but maybe he'd stowed it. Pederson headed for the front door, but I pulled at his arm and pointed. We ran to the fire escape and started climbing.

We hung back from the window at first. It was three inches open; we couldn't hear anything in the apartment. Finally, we looked in. Roy wasn't there. The only person there was Mary Jordan, a .44 held against her right leg, sitting in a chair and staring at the door.

All three of us tensed; we heard, dimly, footsteps in the hall. I had my gun out, again. This time it might do me some good. The woman locked her fingers on her gun and raised it. I steadied my .38 on my left arm. This had to be perfect.

Pederson clamped on my wrist. I pointed with the gun-barrel towards the door, and he understood. He nodded, raised his gun and aimed faster than I could when I was already set, then fired. My own shot was barely behind his.

The shots were a foot apart, three inches from the top of the door. Mine was too far to the side; Pederson's must have

gone right over Roy's head, if Roy was in front of the door. He was—we heard him drop to the floor; a second later Mary's gun jumped in her hand, nearly knocking her chair over backwards. The bullet went through the center of the door.

Then we dropped below the sill while she turned, spitting fury, and fired four shots out the window at us. One bullet hit the window-frame; it ripped the board loose and powdered an already-crumbling brick. Then the door burst open and the spitting sound got louder.

Pederson shoved up the broken window and vaulted over the sill, a virile fifty-odd. I hobbled after him, a doddering old gent of thirty-one. Cartley had her around the waist with one arm and had pinned her arms to her body with the other.

He had lifted her off the floor, turning his hip between her legs to spread them and keep her from kicking backwards. Pederson reached for the handcuffs. I reached for a chair, and sat in it emptying her handbag on the table.

Inside were matchbooks, still unused, from all the restaurants Gillis had written checks to, plus a receipt—dated two days back—from the store where he had done his previous buying. I looked up.

"Playing detective, Mary? Did you find out who she was?"

She clammed up, then. Pederson looked at her with interest. "Aren't you even waiting to shut up till I read your rights? You are an amateur." That stung, but she stayed quiet.

Roy was looking back and forth. He tossed his gun on the table and said, looking tired, "All right, what is it I don't know?"

I gestured at Mary. "Only what she finally knew. I'm not the only one with an invisible lady friend."

"Lady friend?" Pederson stared at me. "You? You never even shave—" He shut his mouth as Roy began chuckling.

"I've had a busy day—I put off shaving." I turned to Mary. "One thing I can't put off, Mary—what's the name of the girl that aced you out?" I wanted her to make a scene and keep Pederson occupied.

"If I'd 'a known," Mary said, "the cops'd know by now."

Roy looked back at me helplessly, then suddenly understood. "The bills?"

I nodded. "If you hadn't been so worried, you'd have seen it, too. Gam must have been a real bastard, borrowing from Mary to take out some other woman. Mary found out, convinced him to break into your house—probably by saying you had evidence against him"—I glanced at her, but she wasn't reacting, so I went on—"and stabbed him after backing him

up to the fireplace with her gun.

"He did the breaking in. That's why that was professional, but everything else—the bomb, the bolted doors, the red-herring to Petlovich—was amateur. Deadly amateur, but amateur." Still no reaction—Pederson was looking at me strangely...

I tried my last shot. "He really wiped the floor with her before she got him, though. What a rotten, low-life—"

She tried to swing at me, ignoring Pederson, Roy and her own cuffed wrists. "You wouldn't dare talk that way if he was here!" she snapped.

Pederson grabbed her. I sidled over quietly, picked Roy's gun off the table, and said politely to him, "Roy, I'd like to shake your hand. We made it."

Roy still had one hand in his coat. He looked at me narrowly, then grinned and stuck out his empty hand. His pocket hung limp. "Thanks for trying, Nate, but the other gun's in the glove compartment. I cooled down on the way over here. One of the kids tipped you off?"

"Yeah," I said, feeling silly. "That Howie is growing up fast; he and Amy make a hell of a team. She's sharper than he is, but he's trying to turn pro."

Roy glanced at Mary Jordon. She was sobbing in frustration as Pederson edged her towards the door. "Tell him not to try too hard, will you?!"

A Matter of Pride

by RICHARD A. MOORE

The Truth Lay Open for Ed to See—But Being Ed, He Managed to Look at it Another Way.

ED WAS IN a lousy mood. It had been a bad week during a bad summer of a bad year. As he drove in view of his drought-parched

lawn, a newscaster told of the breaking-off of crucial negotiations. While parking, he noticed the small round hole in the kitchen

window, cursed the neighborhood kids, then turned the switch killing the radio explanation of the Dodger's losing streak.

Inside, he mixed a dark Scotch and water, unfolded a newspaper and ignored the sound of the vacuum cleaner his wife was angrily scraping over the carpet ten feet away. A switch clicked and he sensed her stare.

"I think we need to talk."

"I can't think of anything I would rather avoid right now, Martha. Hold it until after supper," he said, not looking up from the newspaper.

A note of anger came into her voice. "I don't *want* to wait until after supper. I've been thinking about this for days and there will never be a convenient time for you to talk with me. There never is."

Ed kept the paper in front of him to avoid seeing the bandanna-framed red face. "What is it now? "Are you going to gripe about your allowance again?"

"I want a divorce."

Ed reluctantly dropped the newspaper. "If you think a stupid threat like that is going to frighten me into an increase in your house-money, you're crazy. That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard."

Something about her deadpan look told him she was serious. "You just don't know when you're well off, Martha. You've got a nice home with no kids or job to worry about. All you have to do is keep

the place clean and fix my meals. You've really got it easy."

"I work myself to death around here and you never even notice. I can almost live with your cheapness, but I can't stand being made to feel unwanted, unattractive and stupid."

Ed felt anger flush his face. "Einstein can rest easy in his grave and Cleopatra is fairly safe too. If you don't believe me, just check any mirror. If I hadn't made the mistake of marrying you, your parents would still have another mouth to feed."

"In three years of marriage, you almost convinced me that I really *am* stupid and unlovable. I have news for you, El Braino, I've been having an affair for three months and you haven't suspected a thing."

With the knowledge that she had finally gotten the last word in an argument, Martha marched from the room with an air of triumph. Ed was left with his crumpled newspaper, silent vacuum cleaner and black thoughts.

It was not the thought of losing Martha that outraged him. Life without her would not be a complete bed of nails. It was the thought of her in the arms of another man. Someone was possessing something that was rightfully his, and Ed found that the grossest of insults. Leave she might, but he would find out who the trespasser was and deal with him then.

He awoke the next morning with his mind as hard and lumpy as the sofa on which he had slept. He was staring into his second cup of instant coffee when Martha entered the kitchen, dressed in a very businesslike navy suit.

"I'm going to see a lawyer. You should probably begin making plans about moving out of the house."

The full force of his anger returned. "This is really *too* much. You are running around but I'm the one who has to move. You better talk to your shyster about how you can explain your dirty little affair to a judge."

Martha gave him a not-quite-smug smile. "I'm sure we can find grounds for action. As for infidelity? You have no proof, no proof at all. Next case please."

Now he had a second reason to find the lover. Without incriminating evidence, his wife could easily weep her way into a judge's heart and a fat settlement.

As soon as she left, Ed carefully searched for clues to the identity of her lover. He found nothing. After a few brooding moments, he climbed into his car, drove downtown and rented a small sedan. He returned home and noted with satisfaction his wife's car in the driveway. He parked on a side street, out of easy view of the house but able to watch any departures or arrivals.

It wasn't a long wait. His wife

soon appeared, dressed casually now in blouse and slacks after her formal visit to a lawyer. Ed dropped from view as her small car whirred past the street where he was parked. Quickly, he started his car and eased into the street, giving her about a two-block lead.

He discovered that tailing a car is not easy. Twice he almost had to stop to avoid pulling in directly behind her at stoplights. He made a mental note to buy some sort of disguise if he had to do much of this sort of thing.

Gradually, the two wound their way across town to a neighborhood that was very familiar to Ed. Martha confirmed his guess by parking in front of the two-story house owned by their friends, the Adamses. He resumed his vigil down the street and watched for hours while absolutely nothing happened.

He could easily imagine her crying on Joan's shoulder, spilling out her tawdry secrets. Joan would get a kick out of it all, he thought — she had always despised him. He shuddered at the certainty of Joan telling her husband, Frank, who sat across from him every Thursday at the poker table. He could see the smirk on Frank's face the next time they got together. He knew he would have to put an end to this situation and do it quickly.

It occurred to Ed that if he could get close to the house, he might

overhear enough of the conversation within to be revealing. He scuttled along among the boxwood shrubbery listening for sounds and peeping in windows.

The peeping brought unsuspected results. He spotted his wife stepping across a hallway as naked as a marshmallow. He was still puzzling over the sight when he heard her voice faintly within.

"I'm out of the shower now, darling."

Darling? The certainty of the knowledge washed over him and with it came a bitter sense of betrayal. He sat on the dry earth under the bushed and tortured himself with lurid thoughts of his wife and his best friend.

Ed pushed aside the bushes and walked slowly back to the car. He now had all he needed to avoid a costly settlement, but the economics had suddenly lost importance.

Numbly, he drove without direction for a while before stopping at a bar. After several drinks, feeling began to return and it wasn't very nice. He tossed the liquor into his untasting mouth like an old fireman shoveling coal. His wife's lover was not his only shocking discovery. *He cared.* In some ways that bothered him more.

He drove back to his house and parked beside his wife's car. A look at his face caused her to stare in puzzlement as he walked past her to the bedroom. When he returned with a gun in his hand, the puzzlement turned to fear.

"Come along, Martha. We're going to visit your lover."

"Are you crazy, Ed? Put away that gun now and I'll forget you ever did this."

Ed waved the pistol in the direction of the door. "I don't plan to shoot you, but if you aren't through that door in two seconds, I'll kill you where you stand."

Martha walked quickly to the car. Ed drove but kept the revolver cocked and ready at his side.

After a few miles, Martha began to plead in a low earnest tone. "Think for a moment, Ed. You're throwing the rest of your life away. No matter what you feel now, you're sure to regret it later."

His silence frightened her all the more. "How do you know you aren't making a terrible mistake? What could you have found out in just one day? It's probably just some innocent . . ."

"I know what I know. I have the evidence of my own eyes."

Ed turned onto the side street that led to the Adams' house. Martha glanced around apprehensively and felt hope drain leaving a mountain of fear in its wake.

They parked in front of the house. Ed slid across the seat and pushed her from the car. She tried to speak but had lost the power. They walked to the house and Ed rang the doorbell.

Frank opened the door and a look of surprise and annoyance crossed his face. He did not see the gun. "Well, hello guys. I wish

you had called to let us know you were coming over."

There was an awkward silence. Ed knew he must speak, but his mind seemed blanked of all words and knowledge.

Frank suddenly noticed the gun. "What on God's earth is that for?"

Ed glanced at the gun as if he had forgotten it until the reminder/ "I'm here to kill you, Frank."

The first shot pushed him back into the foyer. The second knocked him down. The third finished it.

Ed dropped the pistol into his pocket and sat in the nearest chair. He had accomplished his purpose and any other movement or

thought seemed unnecessary.

Joan ran from the back of the house, almost tripping on the corpse of her husband. Martha disappeared, but somewhere he heard a phone being dialed.

When the police arrived, they had to shake him before he heard and obeyed orders. His only request was to speak to his wife before leaving for police headquarters. Someone nodded and he was escorted down the hall toward the back of the house. Just before he stepped into the room, he heard his wife speaking in a strange exultant tone,

"Just think, darling, now we are rid of both of the bastards."

MIKE SHAYNE PRESENTS —

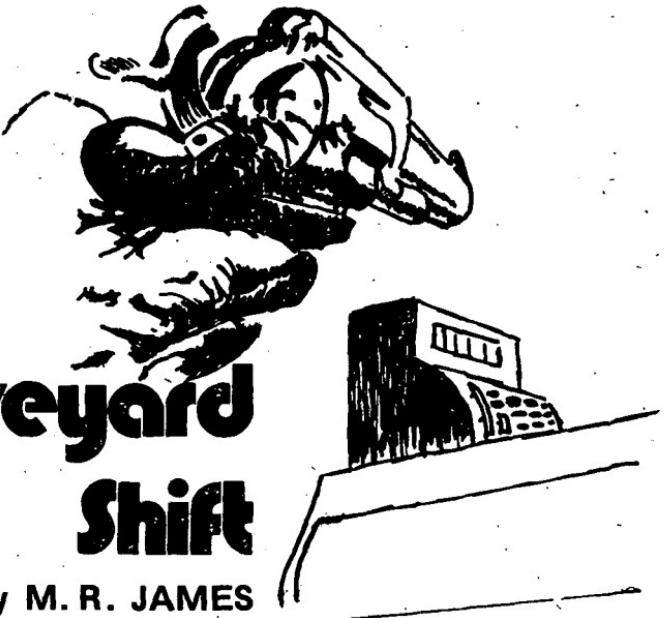
NEXT MONTH'S HEADLINERS

DEATH IN XANADU by BRETT HALLIDAY
the New Mike Shayne Thriller

LONG GONE, FOREVER by JOE R. LANSDALE
A Brilliant New Novelet

THE EHRENGRAF APPOINTMENT
by LAWRENCE BLOCK
A Story of Justified Homicide

THE EVE OF DESTRUCTION by D.C. POYER
A Tale of Suspense from Within



Graveyard Shift

by M. R. JAMES

Frank hated holdups on the job —
but he had come to accept them as
all part of a night's work.

GRAVEYARD SHIFTS are all alike. I know too well the emotions that fill the long nights: boredom and fear. Boredom because nothing different ever happens, fear that sometime it might.

Convenience stores are all alike, too. Boxy little buildings filled with junk food and a few staples like bread and milk. The prices are too high, but where else can you buy things after midnight?

The little KwikStop store wasn't the first one in which I had worked. I've been traveling the country, trying to see some of that

I haven't seen, now that I'm a widower and don't have any reason to stay in one place. The convenience stores always need help, and I have experience. Getting a job is no problem.

Neither is the fact that I'm usually assigned the all-night shift. It gives me the days free to do anything I want.

You see the same type of customers, no matter where the store is. Before midnight, you get teenagers buying cokes and college kids buying beer and potato chips. A lot of young

couples come in to buy milk and diapers. Sometimes you get a drunk who wants to buy beer after hours. Sometimes they get nasty when you refuse.

And sometimes you get one like the man who stepped in earlier tonight. That's where the fear comes in.

He was thin and had a pinched, beard-stubbled face, with too-wide eyes that never stopped moving. His clothes were shabby and his hands were pushed deep in the pockets of his windbreaker. I knew the type right away.

I've been working in the little stores long enough that attempted robberies are nothing new to me. Most stores have a policy about robberies that emphasizes cooperation and observation. They tell the clerks to do whatever the robber says. It's supposed to be safer that way.

But as I looked at this guy, I felt an ache in my belly and the palms of my hands began to sweat. This might be one of those times. The hammer of my pulse began to accelerate.

The man picked up a sack of Fritos and came toward the cash register. His other hand was still in his pocket.

The doors opened and two men and a young boy came in, heading for the soft drink case.

The man in the windbreaker looked hard at the newcomers and then dropped a quarter and a penny on the counter to pay for the

Fritos. I rang up the sale and began to breathe again as he pushed through the doors on his way out.

It wasn't long afterward that George and Eddie pulled up in their patrol car and came inside for coffee, like they do every night.

"Hello, fellas," I said. "You should have been here a little earlier."

George poured himself a cup of the always-ready coffee and asked, "What happened, Frank?"

"Maybe I'm being paranoid, but there was a guy in here I think was going to rob the place. Some customers came in and he changed his mind."

"Did he pull a gun on you?"

"No, I didn't see a gun. It was just a gut feeling. Like I said, maybe I'm paranoid."

"Gut feelings are the best ones," Eddie said. "What did he look like?"

"Thin, maybe one-forty or fifty, about five-nine, sandy hair, probably about thirty years old. He was wearing blue jeans and a brown windbreaker."

Eddie wrote it all down in his notebook while George asked, "Did you see what he was driving?"

"He walked in. He might've had a car parked out of the lights, but if he did, I didn't see it."

"Okay, we'll keep an eye out for him. He probably won't be back, though, at least not tonight."

Business picked up not long after they left, and I was too busy to worry about the man who had been in earlier. I had quite a few customers in and out until three o'clock, when traffic tapered off. It would be slow now until a little after four, when the early morning workers would start coming in.

It was 3:37 when the man returned. I hadn't even seen a car drive by outside for over ten minutes, and I knew he wouldn't have to back out this time. I nodded to him and tried not to look scared as he stepped up to the counter.

"Pack of Camels," he said shortly. I put the cigarettes on the counter between us. "Too late to buy beer?"

"I'm afraid so," I answered. I could feel sweat breaking out on me, dampening the red and white smock all the clerks wore. "Midnight is the latest you can buy it except on Saturdays."

He rocked back on his heels, then forward. His teeth were yellowed and I could see old acne scars on his face. I knew I would never forget the way he looked as he sneered and said, "I guess that'll do it then."

I began to work the cash register. When it popped open, he said, "You come out from behind there. There's a gun in my pocket."

I knew it was silly, but I couldn't help asking, "Is this a hold-up?"

"That's right, jackass. Now you get out from behind that counter like I told you. *Move!*"

I swallowed the huge lump in my throat and began to do like he told me, moving down around the microwave oven and the popcorn machine. The machines shielded me from his view momentarily, and I don't think he even saw my hand go behind my back, under the long smock, to the clip-on holster.

I stepped out, bringing the little pistol up and aiming it at the bridge of his nose. Surprise and fear leaped into his eyes.

The same emotions that must have been on my wife Becky's face when she walked into a little store far away and surprised a man just like this one, a man who had gotten away clean, leaving my world bleeding to death on a dirty tile floor . . .

I pulled the trigger and shattered the expression on his face. He didn't even have time to fire his own gun.

I put the gun on the counter and went to the pay phone to call the police. As I did, I thought about where I would go next. No one would be surprised when I quit this job, not after something like this.

That meant a new town, a new name, a new job. I wouldn't have any trouble finding work.

Like I said, convenience stores are all alike. And I've got plenty of experience.

The Old College Try

by R. MASON

Ron Was Sick of Being Ridiculed by His Partners in Crime. But There wasn't a Thing He Could Do about It—or Was There?

"HEY THERE, HARVARD. How is the college boy doin'?"

Ron swallowed the anger that came up in his throat at Leo's crude greeting, nodded to Hal and went on into the apartment.

"I trust you have some good news for us," Hal said.

"Uh, yeah. There's a shipment in the warehouse now. It came in late this afternoon and they didn't have time to deliver any of it to the suburban stores. Mr. Gilmore told me about it. He said they were all top quality furs."

Hal sipped his martini. "Very good, Ron. I take it all of the security precautions are still the same"

"Yeah, they've gotten back to normal now. That was a good idea, spacing the jobs out."

"I don't like it," Leo said. "Too long between jobs, not enough money. A man's gotta eat."

Hal said, "You would have plenty of money, Leo, if you didn't waste it at the track."

Leo glared but didn't say anything. Ron wished he could get away with talking to the big bruis-

er like Hal did. But then Hal was the boss and the whole set-up had been his idea, so he could say whatever he wanted to.

"All right, then," Hal was saying, "Leo and Calvin will go in the usual way and get the furs."

"Calvin's sick," Leo grunted. "He won't be able to make it."

Ron saw sparks of cold fury begin to burn in Hal's eyes. "What? Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I didn't know it was gonna be a job. It's been so long since the college boy tipped us to anything,

Hal cut him off. "That's not important. Can you handle it by yourself, Leo?"

"No way. Them crates are heavy."

Leo held a match to the end of a cigar. "How about Harvard?"

Ron jumped in surprise. "Me? You're kidding! I'm a shipping clerk, not a —"

"Not a criminal?" Leo barked a laugh. "You're as big a crook as the rest of us. You get your share, don't you? It's about time you got off your butt and earned it!"

'Hal, I can't do anything like that. Our deal was that I would just supply you with information."

Hal sat and looked thoughtful. He seemed not even to hear Ron's appeal.

Leo blew out a cloud of smoke. "What's the matter, Ronnie? Didn't that fancy college have any courses in Breaking and Entering? I guess English professors don't study that kind of thing."

Ron felt the anger, the futility that he always felt when someone threw his education in his face. He forced it down and made himself say calmly, "I was never a professor. I simply took my doctorate in English literature."

"And wound up a shipping clerk in a fur warehouse."

Just once, Ron started to say to himself. *Just once . . .* And then he bitterly accepted the realization that just once would never come.

"Let's not squabble, gentlemen," Hal said. "We're faced with an unfortunate situation here, one which we must make the best of. Ron, there's no question that you have been of great value to us over the past months. Now you have a chance to be of even more value. And since the risk is greater, it seems fair the reward should be greater, too. What do you think, Leo?"

The big man muttered under his breath, but nodded.

"It's all settled, then," Hal went on smoothly. "Who knows, if everything goes well tonight, this

could develop into a permanent position, Ron."

Ron felt like a swimmer who had gotten too far from the beach and was only just realizing it. "But, Hal," he said desperately, "I won't know what to do."

"Leo's a good man. Just do what he says."

"Yeah, kid, follow my lead, and you might come out alive!"

There seemed to be no way out. "Wh-what time should I be back here?" he asked Hal.

Leo ground out his cigar in an ashtray. "You let the kid out that door and you'll never see him again," he warned.

"I think it might be best if you stayed here, Ron. It'll only be for a few hours. Don't look so discouraged. Nothing will go wrong."

Leo laughed harshly. "Yeah, Harvard. All you gotta do is give it the old college try!"

It was slightly after midnight when Hal announced that it was time for them to go. Ron found when he stood up that his knees were shaking. Leo put his corduroy jacket on. Hal opened a drawer in his desk and took out a pistol.

"You'd better take this with you," he said, handing it to Ron.

The little blue gun felt heavy and unnatural in Ron's hand. "A gun? I don't need a gun, Hal. I don't want a gun!"

Leo poked a hard finger into his chest. "You keep it, but you keep it in your pocket while I'm around, understand? It's only for in case

something goes wrong and we get separated. Then you're on your own, kid."

Ron didn't like it, but he slipped the pistol into the pocket of his windbreaker and followed Leo out of the apartment. "Good luck," Hal said as they left. "I'll be waiting right here."

They got into Leo's pickup and drove off down the dark, nearly deserted streets. Ron huddled against the door of the passenger side, and the sick fear that ate at him grew with every passing block.

Leo looked over at him and said, "Don't you foul up. This is a simple job. Me and Calvin done it three times without a hitch. All you got to do is stay right behind me and help me carry the crates to the pickup."

Ron nodded and said, "Okay," but okay was the farthest thing from the way he felt.

By the time they arrived at the warehouse, Ron had gotten control of himself to a certain extent. *Never again*, he told himself.

There's nothing you can do about it this time, but never again.

Leo parked in front of the door to the office. They slipped out of the truck, being careful not to slam the doors. Leo went to the office door, dug in his pocket and pulled out a key. Ron remembered vividly the day he had stolen the key, had it duplicated on his lunch hour, and returned the original.

Once they were inside, Ron

could barely see Leo as he followed the big man's bulk through the darkened office. They moved quietly into the main room of the warehouse. Ron's breath seemed to stick in his throat as Leo used a pocket flashlight to locate the crates they wanted. He knew that the watchman was in one of the small storerooms in the back, eating his lunch, but his nerves were still on fire.

It went quicker than he had expected it would. Some of his fear went away as he concentrated on helping Leo carry the crates. Silence and speed were the important things. There was no time to be scared.

When the last crate of prime furs was in the pickup, they left rapidly, pausing only long enough for Leo to relock the office door. The thefts, months apart and with no sign of violent entry, had the fur company baffled, exactly the way Hal had planned.

Reaction set in when they were several blocks away. Ron began to tremble all over, and his stomach knotted into a ball. Sweat dripped down his forehead, despite the coolness of the night.

Leo looked over at him and chuckled contemptuously.

Hal was all smiles when they walked in. He beamed at Ron and said, "Everything went just fine, didn't it? I told you it would."

Leo said, "I want a drink. Then we can unload them furs." He gulped down the whiskey that Hal

gave him and asked, "When can I get my share?"

"It'll probably be the day after tomorrow before I have the cash," Hal replied. "Is that all right?"

"Okay. Three-way split this time, huh?"

"Yes, I think thirty percent for you this time, Leo instead of twenty-five."

"I oughta get more than that since I had to work with Joe College here. More of a risk. He coulda loused things up."

Ron was standing to one side, head down, but now he looked up and said, "Why do you have to ride me about my education, Leo? I did all right tonight, didn't I?" —

Hal stepped over to him and said quickly, "And naturally, your share will be larger, too, Ron. How does fifteen percent sound to you?"

Leo said, "I don't like punks who think they're better than me 'cause they went to school longer."

"Better than *you!*" Ron exclaimed. "It's you who think you're better than me. You think you're more of a man!"

"How about that fifteen percent?"

"*I am* more of a man."

"That's half what Leo's getting!"

"That's 'cause you're only half the man I am, to get that."

None of them expected what

happened next, least of all Ron. All the emotion that was in him came boiling out, all the anger and fear and insecurity, blasting out of him like the bullets from the gun that was suddenly in his hand, the gun that they had given him.

Hal went down first, writhing feebly on the floor before he died, every hair still in place.

Leo tried to get to Ron but only made it a few steps before he collapsed. He moaned for a moment, and then was quiet.

Ron stood completely still, looking at the bodies. He didn't know how it happened, but it had definitely happened. Now he had to do something about it.

The truck was outside, loaded with valuable furs. He would have to leave town, but at least he would have something with which to make a new start.

He stooped and searched through Leo's pockets until he found the keys to the pickup. It struck him as strange that touching a corpse didn't bother him.

But by the time he got into the pickup, the shakes had started.

He leaned his head forward and rested it on the steering wheel. If he left now, he might be on the run for the rest of his life.

Ron sat there for several long moments, wishing that it was all a dream from which he could wake up. Then he slowly got out of the truck, being careful to wipe the steering wheel and all the door handles.

There was a phone booth at the end of the block. Ron looked up a number and dialed it with shaking fingers. When a sleepy male voice finally answered, he said, "This is Ron Davis, Mr. Gilmore. I hate to wake you, but I think I've found the people who've been robbing the warehouse."

Excited questions came back at him over the wire.

"Yes, I was passing by down there tonight and saw a pickup leaving the warehouse. It didn't look like anyone who had any business being there, so I followed them. There were two men. They went into an apartment house. There - there was some shooting. One of them came running out. I

don't know where he went, but... I think those new furs are still here in the truck."

Mr. Gilmore babbled for a moment about a reward and a promotion and a raise, and then told Ron to stay where he was, that the police would be there soon.

"Sure, Mr. Gilmore. That's fine."

Ron hung up, wiped off the little pistol, and dropped it down a sewer. Now he could wait for the police. He sat down on the curb.

Sirens began to come closer in the night. He had solved this problem:

All he had to do now was to live with the solution.

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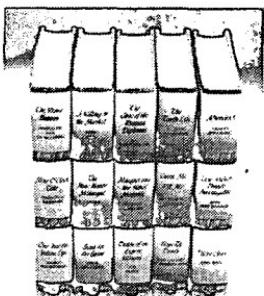
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